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ABSTRACT

The key features of effective career discussions at work were explored in a large-scale investigation that included semi-structured interviews with employers from 5 organizations in England, 118 employees who had participated in discussions about their own careers, and 30 employees identified by their employers as excellent givers of career support. The following were among the key findings: (1) sources of career support include managers and informal mentoring relationships; (2) about half of positive discussions occur informally; (3) the most important requirements of givers of career support include an interest in the individual and a commitment to helping, honesty, impartiality, challenging the receiver and offering advice where appropriate, and using interpersonal skills to facilitate the discussion; (4) good career discussions lead to action and provide a motivational shot in the arm; (5) career support is more central to employees than organizations choose to recognize; (6) career support is mainly the job of the line, but this should be the line management as a community rather than just the direct boss; and (7) organizations must encourage individuals to have a range of informal, confidential discussions with people they trust and have opportunities to talk about their careers as a normal part of organizational life. (Contains 17 tables and 14 references.) (MN)

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ED 470 372

NICEC PROJECT REPORT

STRAIGHT TALKING: EFFECTIVE CAREER DISCUSSIONS AT WORK

BY

WENDY HIRSH
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JENNIFER M. KIDD

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CRAC

Drawing on the accounts of over one hundred managers and professionals, this report explores the key features of effective career discussions at work. It identifies the types of people with whom good career discussions tend to be held, the settings in which these take place, the skills and personal qualities of those who give good support, and the impact that these discussions have on individual employees.

The findings show that there is a wide diversity in the people who can provide useful career support. Much of this support takes place outside formal HR processes, and effective discussions are often initiated by the individual employee. Those giving career support need to take a challenging and positive approach: counselling skills are important but not sufficient. Individuals need to play their part by being open-minded and honest. Effective career discussions often lead to practical actions and can also be very motivating for employees. The report concludes with a framework of practical do's and don'ts for those giving career support and individual employees receiving it.

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Contents

		Page
Executive summary: Effective career discussions at work		1
1	**Turning the spotlight on career discussions**	3
1.1	Career discussions: cornerstone of the self-managed career	3
1.2	Looking on the bright side: project design	4
1.3	Organisational contexts	5
1.4	Key dimensions of effective career discussions	6
1.5	Structure of the report	7
2	**Where and with whom do effective discussions occur?**	8
2.1	Who provides effective career support?	8
2.2	Where do effective discussions take place?	10
2.3	Understanding the relationship between givers and receivers	11
2.4	Summary	12
3	**What goes on in an effective career discussion?**	13
3.1	What are the key skills and behaviours?	13
3.2	Characteristics of the person	15
3.3	Behaviours arising from the giver's role	15
3.4	Management of the process	16
3.5	Interpersonal skills	17
3.6	The content of the session	18
3.7	Making links between skills, types of discussion and types of givers	20
3.8	The dynamics of an effective career discussion	21
3.9	Summary	21
4	**What happens as a result of effective discussions?**	23
4.1	Actions	23
4.2	Impacts of discussions	24
4.3	Linking impact to discussion setting	27
4.4	Summary	29
5	**Participants' reflections on career discussion**	30
5.1	Where should career discussions take place?	30
5.2	How often and how formal?	31
5.3	Who do individuals want to talk to?	32
5.4	The person and the relationship matter more than the hat	34
5.5	A management culture which pays real attention to individuals....	35
5.6	....and gives everyone the skills to both receive and give support	36
5.7	Summary	36
6	**Implications for employers**	37
6.1	Career discussions are central to self-managed careers	37
6.2	Boss-subordinate appraisal does not meet the need for career support	38
6.3	Encouraging informal discussions with networks of managers	39
6.4	Specialist help and formal interventions can provide more options	39
6.5	HR is needed as a real partner in career support	40
6.6	Mainstreaming the skills and knowledge for career discussion	41
6.7	Career discussion, personal attention and motivation	41

7 Lessons for individuals and those they talk to 42

7.1 Effective career discussions 42

7.2 Kinds of career discussion 42

7.3 How to make career discussions more effective: Practical tips for givers and receivers of career support 44

References 47

Appendix: Method and sample 48

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We would also like to thank the very large numbers of people who gave their time to be interviewed and who were so frank and open in sharing their experiences. The clarity and passion with which they described good and bad career discussions will stay with us for many years.

In presenting the findings from such a large volume of narrative data there are real challenges in providing a balanced picture of such diverse personal experiences and views. The picture given in this report is based on a rigorous analysis, but the conclusions are those of the authors.

Wendy Hirsh, Jenny Kidd, Charles Jackson
May 2001

Executive summary: Effective career discussions at work

If employees are to manage their own careers effectively, they need access to information and advice. For the most part, this will occur through the opportunity to discuss their careers with other people in the workplace. Most employers would agree with this view, but also admit that employees are often dissatisfied with the career support they receive.

This report presents the findings of a large-scale investigation conducted with the support and direct involvement of a consortium of employers. It is based on the accounts of over a hundred employees who had experienced effective discussions about their own careers ('receivers'), and over thirty people identified (by these employees) as excellent givers of career support ('givers'). These accounts of over 250 conversations were analysed in detail. Most of the individuals involved were managers or professionals at very varied career stages.

It's good to talk, but not easy in appraisal:

- There is wide diversity among the people who can provide useful career support through conversations of varied kinds. Just over a fifth of positive discussions were with an individual's direct line manager. Many more were with other managers in the organisation, sometimes as 'one-off' conversations and sometimes within what one might call informal mentoring relationships.
- About half of the positive discussions took place quite independently of any formal process. Only a small proportion of positive career discussions (about 7%) occurred in formal appraisals or development reviews. Other formal processes (*eg* formal mentoring, development centres) were more likely to lead to effective career discussions.
- People who have good discussions about their own careers have most often initiated these themselves. Positive discussions were twice as likely to be initiated by the receiver as by the giver.

There needs to be trust, challenge and relevant information:

- In general, the most important requirements in givers of career support are: the giver's personal qualities; challenging the receiver and offering advice where appropriate; using interpersonal skills to facilitate the discussion; and providing information about opportunities.
- The key personal qualities of effective givers are: interest in the individual and commitment to helping; honesty; impartiality; and being seen as trustworthy. These qualities and attitudes are just as important as specific helping skills, if not more so.
- Givers should not be afraid of being frank and honest, particularly in giving constructive feedback about skills and potential. This is what many receivers need and value. Communicating information and giving direct advice is often appropriate. Non-directive counselling-type behaviours are rarely sufficient to help an employee with their career.
- Individual 'receivers' also need skills and the right attitude to obtain opportunities for career discussion and to use these opportunities productively.
- Unsuccessful discussions come about because the giver lacks interest and commitment to the individual; does not attempt to understand their concerns; 'over-manages' the conversation; or avoids frank and honest dialogue.

Good career discussions lead to action and provide a motivational shot in the arm:

- About three-quarters of positive career discussions led to practical action of some kind, ranging from follow-up meetings to a job move or development activity. Most actions were taken by the individual receiver of support.
- Four main types of impact occurred in over half the positive discussions: a clearer future career direction; self-insight; information about career opportunities; and generally 'feeling good' (*eg* feeling reassured, feeling valued). About a third of positive conversations led to job moves; about a quarter led to on-going dialogue with the organisation, greater political awareness about internal processes, development opportunities, or improved career skills.
- Conversations with different people and in different settings have different, but overlapping, impacts. An individual is likely to benefit from a variety of career discussions: some giving information and others of a more exploratory or reflective nature.

Companies need to encourage more effective career discussions:

- Career support is more central to employees than organisations choose to recognise. Career development has little to do with the forms which get put on the end of the typical performance management system. Career development is about someone's future working life. It is a key issue for employees and they are amazed and frustrated that organisations do not engage in it properly.
- Promoting effective career discussions should be an important part of a wider career development strategy. Good discussions improve people's career plans but are also important motivators. Individuals were affected by good – and bad – experiences for many years.
- We need to face the fact that boss-subordinate appraisal is not the main arena for career discussion. Career support is mainly the job of the line, but this should be the line management as a community, not just the direct boss. Bosses are often in a poor position to help individuals with their career issues.
- Individuals need to be encouraged to have a range of informal, confidential discussions with people they trust and who have the right knowledge, skills and information to help them. These will most often be other managers within the business or their peers.
- More formal career interventions (*eg* formal mentoring, workshops, counselling) can all be useful if the providers are chosen with care, and individuals can be supported over a period of time (*eg* by including follow-up meetings after events such as workshops).
- The HR function needs to clarify its own role in providing career support to individuals. Employees and line managers want an HR function which is both active and credible in this area.
- This study does not advocate a new formal initiative called 'career discussion'. Rather, we ought to recognise that people need to talk about their careers as a normal part of organisational life. Part of the strength of the idea of effective career discussion is that it makes the link between the abstract concept of 'career development' and something as tangible and everyday as a conversation.
- All working people need to learn how to do this well. Employees need to know how to get a good discussion as much as managers need to know how to give one. The skills and attitudes for effective career discussion need to be part of the mainstream corporate culture and incorporated into training. This study has generated a detailed checklist for givers and receivers of advice as a start point to such practical action.

1 Turning the spotlight on career discussions

1.1 Career discussions: cornerstone of the self-managed career

Individuals working for organisations have a pressing need to manage their own careers effectively. They need to do this to progress within their current employing organisation towards more interesting, more responsible and more highly rewarded work. This is the conventional, and still often relevant, meaning of 'career'. But individuals also need to manage their own careers to make sideways moves across internal organisational boundaries into areas of work they may prefer. They are often rightly concerned about what they would do if they were made redundant or chose to leave their current employer; so many want career plans which extend outside their current workplace and into new career areas (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). Individuals also need to be updating and extending their skills all the time to remain employable inside or outside their current organisation.

All these aspects of career development may be relevant to a particular individual employee in a continuously shifting labour market, and it is the employee who mostly has to take charge of thinking about and acting on their own career and development plans (Arthur *et al.*, 1999). This need for individual career planning is increased rather than decreased by uncertainty within the employing organisation. Individuals always need to be ready to adjust their career plans to respond to re-organisation or job loss.

Many employing organisations have downplayed the idea of 'career' in recent years in the wake of downsizing and the seeming difficulty of offering career progression. Yet organisations remain in need of the effective career development of their employees, to supply higher-level skills and deliver the workforce flexibility they now need. In a labour market where there is intense competition for high quality recruits – the so-called 'war for talent' (Chambers *et al.*, 1998) – many studies have shown the centrality of career development to the attraction and retention of the best employees (Winter and Jackson, 1999). Others have shown the importance of supporting individuals more generally in maintaining performance and commitment (Eisenberger *et al.*, 2001). So businesses ignore career development at their own peril.

Some individuals want little help from others in managing their own careers; others may want a lot. The majority of employees need at least some help from others in the form of information or advice. Information is needed not just on particular jobs, which may well disappear, but on the direction of the business, profession or sector, and therefore the kinds of skills and roles relevant for the future. Most of this information and advice will come in the form of a conversation with someone else: what we are calling a career discussion.

Organisations have mainly assumed that the annual performance review (or sometimes a separate development review) between boss and subordinate will be the place where career information and advice is shared. But we already know that even in organisations with well-established appraisal systems, many employees still feel they are lacking the career information and advice they need (Hirsh, 2000). So do we need to improve the career element of formal appraisal, or do we need new models of where career discussions should take place? Are more recent development interventions such as mentoring, coaching and development centres providing more effective forums for career discussion?

This research project was born out of unease with the lack of effective career discussion in the workplace and perceived tensions between theory, current practice and what individuals really need. The study therefore had a simple objective: to discover ways in which more employees could have useful discussions of their careers at work, which would provide them with the information and advice they need to manage their careers effectively.

1.2 Looking on the bright side: project design

A survey of a random sample of employees seemed likely to show yet again that a depressingly low proportion of them are satisfied with the career support they receive. Most company employee attitude surveys already show this. So we decided to go in search of employees who had been excited by the quality of discussions they had actually experienced. If we could find some good practice, we thought, we might be able to see how to make more of it happen.

The idea of 'effective career discussion', plus the research concept of finding positive experiences, attracted a number of employing organisations. So the National Institute for Careers Education and Counselling (NICEC) and the Careers Research and Advisory Centre (CRAC) brought together a consortium of major employers to identify the key features of effective career discussions at work. The members of the consortium were Kingfisher, Rolls-Royce, BP, Consignia (the Post Office at the time of this project), the Cabinet Office, the Home Office, the Department of Health and PricewaterhouseCoopers. Some of this group actively participated in the fieldwork and all sponsored the project. All the consortium members were actively involved in the design of the project and in debating its findings as they emerged. Much shared learning took place during this process.

We defined 'effective career discussion' from the individual's point of view as *'a discussion about aspects of their career which the individual finds of significant positive value'*. We were interested in such discussions wherever they occurred and whether informal or part of a formal process or event.

We sought volunteer employees in five of the consortium organisations who had experienced what they felt were effective career discussions. They were from sub-groups of the workforce selected by each of the consortium members. These target populations were defined in varied ways (*eg* senior managers; graduate entrants; site or function; those attending a development centre *etc.*). Most, but not all, of the sub-samples chosen were from managerial and professional groups. Where volunteers came forward from an e-mail trawl of a substantial target population (often of several hundred), typically about 10-15% of the populations volunteered themselves as having had a positive career conversation. This was the case even in groups, such as graduate trainees, who received additional career support.

The selected random sample from among the volunteers were interviewed, mainly by telephone, for 35-60 minutes; some of the additional volunteers completed a short questionnaire by e-mail. The interviews covered:

- Detailed accounts of one or more positive experiences of career discussion: who the conversation was with, in what setting it took place, the content of the discussion and how people behaved during it, and what happened afterwards.
- Accounts of any negative experiences of career discussion the participant could recall, in the same terms as above.
- The participant's general views about how they would like career discussions to take place.

As a final step we asked the participants to identify any individuals they saw as excellent people to talk to about career issues, *ie* effective 'givers' of career support. Without breaching confidentiality, we followed up a sample of these 'givers' and asked them roughly the same sorts of questions: accounts of positive and negative experiences of giving career support, and their general views on how career discussions should take place.

The Appendix gives more information about how participants were contacted and their characteristics.

This approach yielded a very substantial set of data from 118 'receivers' of career support and 33 'givers' of career support to others. The interviews and questionnaires generated information about 251 conversations, of which 209 were described as positive by the interviewees and 42 as negative. Each of these conversations was analysed in detail. The variables covered aspects of the individual and the giver, the setting in which the conversation took place, the content of the conversation and the manner in which it was conducted, and the outcomes reported. The general views of all those taking part were also classified and coded.

1.3 Organisational contexts

Before we look in detail at what the study shows, we need to remember that most of these conversations took place at work and were influenced by the surrounding culture and by some of the processes and systems which the case-study organisations had in place. It was interesting and useful that the participating organisations had adopted a variety of different mechanisms for supporting career development. Some features of the case organisations were as follows:

Kingfisher is a major retail group moving into international markets. The companies (Woolworths, B&Q *etc.*) are strong entities and have their own HR function. There is a corporate high-potential graduate entry scheme (KMDS) and the career development for these entrants is co-ordinated at company as well as group level. Formal mentoring has been used in recent years, especially for high potential young managers. Directors are seen to have a strong direct influence on individuals' careers.

Consignia has undergone major change in the last few years with the creation of new business units. Many managers have changed their jobs as a result. Assessment and development centres have been used both as a means of re-structuring and as a support to managers in dealing with their own careers. In some cases development centres have been followed by the offer of one-to-one discussions with the facilitator (either an internal or external psychologist) or the corporate HR Director. External coaches have also been used. In theory individuals apply for jobs internally, although during re-organisations many have been placed in new jobs.

Rolls-Royce has sought to strengthen line involvement in career development in a number of ways. Line managers are encouraged to hold frequent one-to-one meetings with their subordinates to progress performance and development issues. A system of 'development cells' take a succession planning process down to professional level, so groups of managers discuss the development and career direction of those they manage. They are then responsible for feeding back and taking action on those plans. This system of company planning exists in parallel with a fairly open job market, in which individuals apply for internal job vacancies. Some functions, especially engineering, co-ordinate and offer support for career development for the entire population of a function across divisional boundaries. The HR function contains some individuals who have specialist skills in career issues and who can offer detailed diagnostic tools and career interviews.

PricewaterhouseCoopers is a professional services organisation operating in over 150 countries. It is a major employer of graduates, many of whom are trained as accountants during their first few years. The focus of our research was ABAS UK, the audit and business advisory function in the UK. The development and retention of graduates, particularly once they qualify as accountants, remains a major challenge in a very competitive external labour market. ABAS UK allocates each trainee a 'counselling manager' who advises them on training and development issues as well as being responsible for reviewing their performance. Trainees and recently qualified accountants are encouraged to discuss their career development with their counselling managers and are also encouraged to make use of opportunities, such as secondments overseas or to other parts of the business, to widen their experience within the organisation once they qualify.

The **Department of Health** spans four main business groups, eight regional offices and six executive agencies, employing more than 5,000 staff in England. It employs mainly 'generalist' civil servants, but also some specialists (*eg* doctors, nurses, economists). In recent years, there has been a steady recruitment of staff from other sectors. Graduates are also recruited both via the Civil Service Fast Stream Development Programme and the Launch Pad, a recently launched departmental scheme. With the exception of the Fast Stream, staff manage their own careers through a system of open advertising and application for internal jobs. The Department of Health has an active programme to promote the interchange of staff between the Civil Service and other sectors. Performance Review is seen as the main process for supporting career dialogue.

1.4 Key dimensions of effective career discussions

Figure 1.1 Key dimensions of effective career discussions

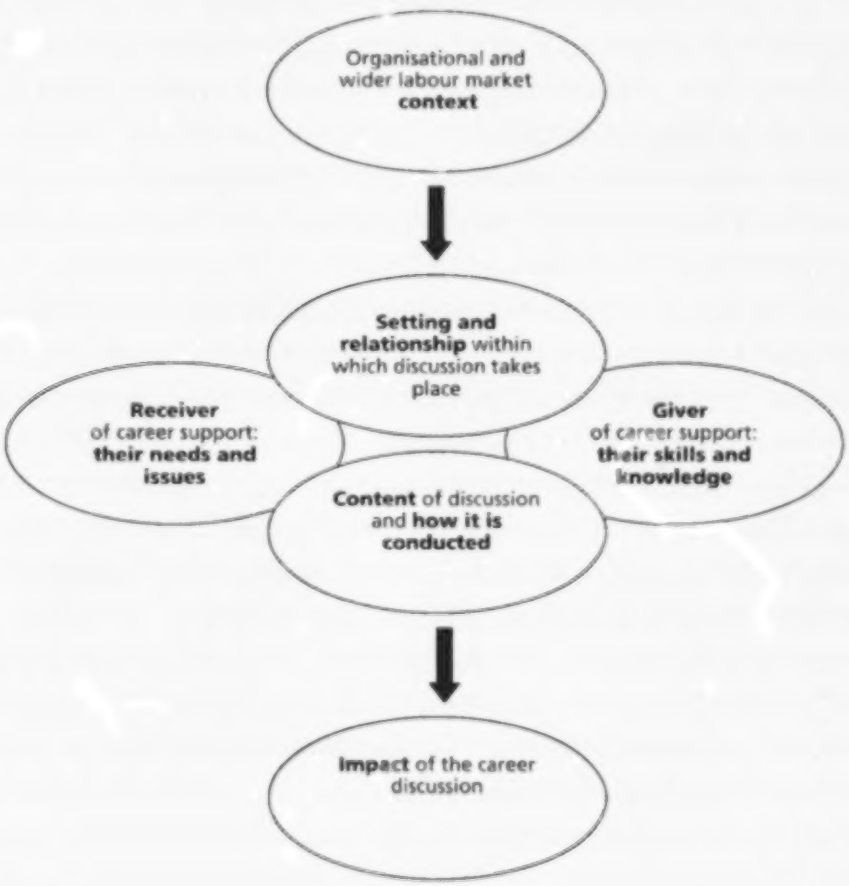

Organisational and wider labour market **context**
Setting and relationship within which discussion takes place
Receiver of career support: **their needs and issues**
Giver of career support: **their skills and knowledge**
Content of discussion and **how it is conducted**
Impact of the career discussion

Figure 1.1 shows the key dimensions of effective career discussions explored in this report. We have already mentioned the importance of organisational and labour market contexts, which threaded through all the accounts we heard. The four central parts of the model relate to the two people involved in the discussion, the setting in which the conversation takes place and the content of the discussion itself. These are all taken as influencing the impact of the discussion on the individual and the practical actions they and others may take afterwards.

1.5 Structure of the report

The report explores the features of the model above and the interplay between them. The early chapters of this report present the data analysis. The later chapters interpret these findings and discuss their implications for policy-makers and individuals. The report addresses the following topics:

- How effective career discussions come about, who they are with, and in what settings they take place (chapter 2).
- What goes on in a good conversation: how those involved in effective discussions prepare for them, the information they exchange, how they behave towards each other, and the skills they are using (chapter 3).
- The impact of good conversations on the individual and the actions which result; the relationships between where and with whom the conversation takes place and its impact (chapter 4).
- How receivers and givers of career support would like to see career discussions taking place (chapter 5).
- The implications of this project for organisations – a summary for policy-makers (chapter 6).
- Implications for individual givers and receivers of career support – a list of practical tips (chapter 7).

Throughout the report we use the shorthand of 'receiver' to stand for the individual employee who is receiving career support from another person, and the term 'giver' for this other person giving support. Where interview extracts are quoted, (R) and (G) are used to indicate whether the comments were made by a 'receiver' or 'giver' of career support.

2 Where and with whom do effective discussions occur?

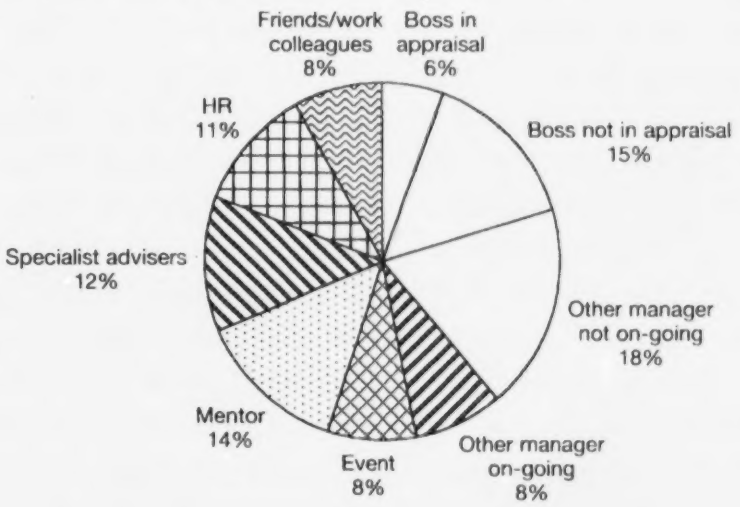
To start with, we look at where and with whom effective career discussions take place. We focus primarily on the positive experiences of the receivers of careers support, to examine both the range of givers that receivers talk to and the relationship that exists between them.

2.1 Who provides effective career support?

This is the first question we wanted to answer. We developed a simple classification to map the various settings in which receivers reported positive discussions and the people they were talking to. On the basis of this mapping we divided these 162 discussions into nine categories as follows:

1. Discussions with the line manager (*ie* boss) in appraisal: 6% of all positive discussions.
2. Other discussions with the boss (excluding those that took place at events): 15% of all positive discussions.
3. Discussions with other managers that are on-going, *ie* discussions which might be considered as involving some degree of informal mentoring: 8% of all positive discussions.
4. One-off discussions with other managers (*ie* that are not on-going): 18% of all positive discussions.
5. Discussions that took place at events (career events, training courses *etc.*): 8% of all positive discussions.
6. Discussions with formal mentors or coaches (including PwC Counselling Managers): 14% of all positive discussions.
7. Discussions with specialists such as external advisers or psychologists (excluding those that took place at events): 12% of all positive discussions.
8. Discussions with HR, including both generalists and HR development specialists: 11% of all positive discussions.
9. Discussions with friends and work colleagues: 8% of all positive discussions.

Figure 2.1 Types of discussions



The results are summarised in Figure 2.1. This shows that just over a quarter of all positive discussions that took place were with managers other than the individual's line manager, nearly a quarter with HR or other specialists, and a fifth with line managers.

Rather less than a third of the discussions with other managers were part of an on-going career support relationship, and only about a quarter of discussions with line managers took place directly as part of an appraisal or development review.

Not surprisingly, while there is a clear relationship between the type of person with whom the discussion is held and the sort of situations in which you meet them, how well you know someone is also related to where you meet them and who they are. For example, you meet groups at events and you are unlikely to know them at all beforehand. Similarly, you tend to know work colleagues and friends outside the organisation and meet with them on an informal and unplanned basis.

There are some types of activity that are also carried out predominantly by certain sorts of people. Line managers and people with similar responsibilities (*eg* project managers) carry out appraisals and have regular one-to-one meetings with people who report to them.

Formal mentoring and coaching are becoming more widespread (Clutterbuck, 1998). Mentoring and coaching are carried out by mentors internally and specialists externally. Specialist advisers external to the organisation also tend to be involved in meetings to follow up a formal intervention or process. However, while most specialist advisers were not known prior to the discussion, virtually all mentors have an on-going relationship.

Discussions with managers who are not your line manager tend to be described as informal (*ie* not part of a formal company HR process). However even these informal discussions are much more likely to be by arrangement (*ie* an appointment was made) than to be completely unplanned, although of the discussions with other managers which were part of an on-going relationship, half took place without an appointment.

Career discussions with HR staff, whether generalists or specialists, are also most likely to be at meetings outside any formal HR process. Most HR generalists were not well-known prior to the meeting, but HR development specialists were more likely to be known or to have an on-going relationship with the individual.

Table 2.1 summarises other key points about the positive discussions that receivers described.

Table 2.1 Key points about positive discussions

- Over half (55%) took place with managers in their organisations (including PwC Counselling Managers), although only a fifth are with an individual's line manager (see Figure 2.1).
- Three-quarters of the discussions for which length was recorded lasted over 45 minutes. NB For about a third of discussions this information was not relevant (*ie* they were events or were part of a series of discussions in an on-going relationship).
- Over a third of discussions took place with people who were described as not known at all or only known a little, prior to the discussion.
- About a quarter of discussions were not initiated by either party because they took place as an expected part of a process (*eg* appraisal, formal mentoring); but of the 60% of discussions clearly initiated by the receiver or the giver, twice as many were initiated by the receiver as by the giver.
- Most (83%) discussions, apart from those that took place in a group setting, took place with someone who was older than the receiver; 64% took place with someone of the same gender as the receiver but, while 82% of male receivers had their positive discussions with men, so did 58% of female receivers.
- Half the discussions were not part of a formal HR process. Only 7% took place as part of a performance appraisal or development review.
- The vast majority (80%) of discussions took place by appointment, as did the majority (59%) of discussions which were not part of any formal HR process. Three-quarters of discussions with friends and work colleagues were unplanned, as were about half the discussions with other managers with whom receivers had an on-going relationship.

2.1.1 *Organisational differences*

The pattern of givers of positive support varied between the organisations, reflecting both the different target groups participating in the research and variations in organisational structures and processes. In particular, no discussions at PwC were coded as taking place with an individual's boss, as this role is taken by the Counselling Managers (whom we have labelled as formal mentors). HR emerged as important givers of support in Kingfisher and Rolls Royce, but no-one from PwC reported having a discussion with HR. Other managers were important givers of advice in all the participating organisations. Specialist advisers and groups at events were significant sources of positive discussions in Consignia, where people who had participated in a series of development centres were targeted for inclusion in the study.

2.1.2 *Are negative discussions different?*

Half the negative discussions reported by receivers were with their line managers, although this could just be a function of the fact that individuals generally have more conversations with their line managers than with other people. Negative discussions were more likely to be single conversations and not to be part of on-going career support relationships. They also tended to be shorter, with over half reported as lasting less than 45 minutes.

These latter points are probably not surprising. Individuals are not likely to go back to people with whom they perceive that they have had a negative experience. They may also cut short meetings that seem to be going nowhere.

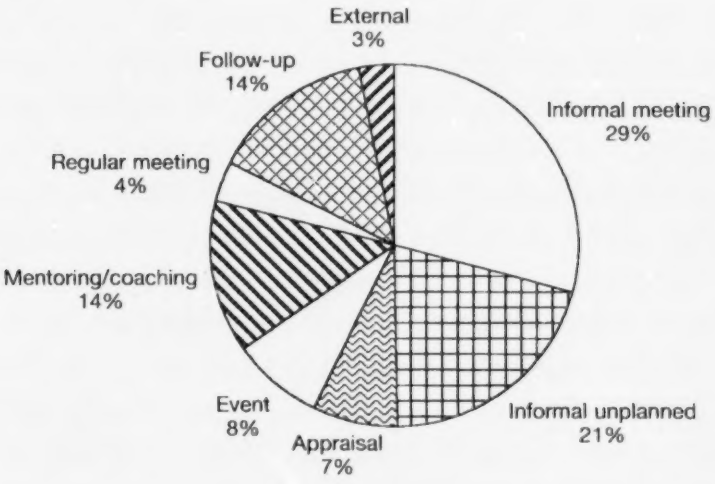
2.2 Where do effective discussions take place?

We have grouped the settings in which positive discussions took place into eight categories:

1. Informal meetings (*ie* not part of a formal HR process) for which an appointment was made: 29% of all positive discussions.
2. Informal unplanned (*ie* meetings that took place without an appointment being made): 21% of all positive discussions.
3. Appraisal (including both appraisal and development reviews): 7% of all positive discussions. (This figure is slightly higher than the 6% given in Section 2.1 as a few appraisals were with people other than the direct boss).
4. Events (including training and development sessions, development centres, career workshops and other career events): 8% of all positive discussions.
5. Mentoring/coaching (including counselling meetings with Counselling Managers in PwC): 14% of all positive discussions.
6. Regular 'one-to-one' meetings with line managers: 4% of all positive discussions.
7. Follow-up meetings of various kinds (*eg* meetings about personal development plans, follow-up to a development centre or workshop, feedback on selection or recruitment processes): 14% of all positive discussions.
8. External meetings (*eg* with recruitment consultants or visits to other organisations): 3% of all positive discussions.

Figure 2.2 summarises this information and shows that about half the positive discussions were not part of any formal HR processes. Of the remainder, more took place in what we might call 'semi-formal' settings (mentoring, regular one-to-one meetings with the boss, follow-up meetings after an appraisal, career intervention or job interview) than in specified HR processes (eg appraisals or events). A comparison with the negative discussions described by receivers shows that a similar proportion took place in informal meetings. No negative discussions were recorded as taking place at events or external meetings.

Figure 2.2 Settings for positive discussions



2.3 Understanding the relationship between givers and receivers

Apart from knowing something about the circumstances in which discussions took place, the other key feature of positive discussions which emerges from this study is the importance of the relationship that exists between the giver and the receiver.

Our analysis shows that four out of ten discussions took place as part of an on-going career support relationship that the receiver had with an individual. In nearly all (88%) of these cases, the people knew each other well prior to the conversation.

Interestingly, of the remaining positive discussions very many took place with people the individuals did not know well. Just over half (53%) of these took place with people who were described as not known at all or only known a little, prior to the discussion.

There was evidence that some receivers had carefully selected the individual with whom they intended to have a discussion. For example, one graduate trainee noted that he had informal information from his work colleagues that he was going to talk to someone that he could trust, although this was the first time that they had met. Even though he said he was taking 'pot-luck' in initiating the discussion, in reality he had not chosen someone at random to talk to.

Nor should we underestimate the importance of relationships once established. When good people to talk to have been found, they are hung on to. One senior professional, for example, described going 300 miles to have a one-hour discussion with a former boss about her future career direction. Table 2.2 highlights some quotes from our interviews about the importance of the relationship between giver and receiver.

Table 2.2 Quality of the relationship between giver and receiver

'She is normally effective but usually cool and brusque. She suddenly became a different person. She was very open and candid about my aspirations and direction. She came up with suggestions. The conversation was close and friendly. It surprised me that she was not just going through the process. Our relationship crossed a barrier. She got back from me an honesty because she had really tried and was trying to do right by me. We now have a warm relationship.' (Career discussion which led to a changed relationship with boss)

'It's about having that working relationship that builds up over time.' (Relationship with boss)

'I developed trust with my boss – trust that I could speak off the record.' (Discussion with boss)

'She was keen to have me. She saw potential in me which I did not see myself. I have always found her approachable, although other people don't. She can be dismissive of other people's ideas. It's about personal chemistry. After four years she is still supportive. She never interfered but was watching my career. She always gives a lot of praise but also highlights other things – sets high standards. She sends me little notes and gives me new jobs to do.' (Functional head)

'He was one big job step above me. I didn't know him well. He was like God. I wouldn't have called him by his first name. He was a high-level guardian angel. He went out of his way to give me challenge and feedback. Our conversations were not very deep. He would not have seen it as coaching or mentoring. But he was pushing me and batting for me. We are still in touch even though he is now retired. I now call him Ian and we write to each other'. (Boss becoming long-term mentor)

'Our friendship started 9 years ago when we worked together. My discussions with him are the most challenging I have. We look at pros and cons of job moves and choices and he adds insights. He helps my thinking. He is brutal and really does make me justify my decisions. We set standards for each other. It's intellectually interesting. We are using management techniques but in a personal way. We are learning. I have given other people the frameworks we have evolved.' (Mutual support by peers who are now both senior managers)

2.4 Summary

Although the participants in this study were recruited as volunteers and are not necessarily representative of all individuals who have had effective career discussions, we believe that the sample represents a diverse set of individuals in terms of age and work experience. This gives us confidence that the conclusions drawn from our analyses will be applicable across a range of organisations and work settings.

The main conclusions from this analysis of where and with whom effective career discussions took place are:

- The most striking feature is the diversity of people with whom positive discussions are held. Discussions take place with a wide range of givers, most of whom, but not all, work for the same organisation as the receiver.
- Many positive discussions take place as part of on-going career support relationships between givers and receivers; but, in a significant proportion of cases, receivers had positive discussions with people they did not know at all or did not know well prior to the discussion.
- Receivers initiate twice as many discussions as givers (excluding those that are part of an expected process such as appraisal or formal mentoring).
- At least half the effective career discussions took place outside of any formal HR process. Only a very small proportion took place as part of a formal performance appraisal or development review. Many of the remainder took place in semi-formal settings such as with a formal mentor, or in follow-up meetings after a career intervention or job interview.

3 What goes on in an effective career discussion?

Having looked at where effective discussions occur, we now turn our attention to what goes on inside them. What kinds of things are discussed? What qualities, skills and behaviours do good givers display? Do receivers also play a part in making a discussion effective? The accounts of helpful discussions related to us by receivers gave graphic detail of the most helpful and unhelpful behaviours shown by givers and receivers. In this section we describe these qualities and how they were used in career discussions. We draw mainly on the behaviours described by receivers in their accounts of positive discussions, but we also use givers' reports where appropriate.

3.1 What are the key skills and behaviours?

Givers' behaviours are summarised in Table 3.1. This shows the skills and behaviours mentioned most frequently by receivers in relation to positive discussions. They are grouped into 13 categories, which in turn form five general clusters of skills and behaviours.

Table 3.1 Behaviours and skills shown by givers

General clusters	Main categories	Most frequently mentioned items
Characteristics of the person	Personal qualities	Interest in the individual and commitment to helping, honest and frank, open, positive and enthusiastic, friendly, warm, objective and impartial, perceptive, trustworthy
	Intellectual qualities	Analytic, realistic, good judgement
Behaviours arising from giver's role	Status	Offering to sponsor or act as advocate
	Knowledge and experience	Using knowledge of individual and organisation, using own experience, credibility
Management of the process	Preparation before session	Availability, preparing for session
	Managing the session	Non-directive approach, structuring session, tailoring session to suit individual, following up or delivering afterwards
Interpersonal skills	Challenge and advice	Challenging, giving advice, probing, offering suggestions, confronting
	Facilitative skills	Listening, instilling confidence, empowering, showing empathy, using self-disclosure, effective questioning, reflecting back
Content of the session	Information	Giving information about opportunities inside or outside organisation
	Relating individuals to opportunities	Matching individual qualities to opportunities, expanding thinking, giving new perspectives
	Giving feedback	Giving feedback on potential, giving feedback on strengths and weaknesses
	Use of tools	Providing frameworks or tools to aid discussion, using critical incidents
	Future orientation	Future focus to discussion, action-orientated

Rather surprisingly, asking receivers what good givers did produced a large number of descriptions, not only of skills, but of what we might call personal qualities. Indeed, this was the most frequently mentioned category of 'behaviours'. The more specific categories of behaviours mentioned by receivers in more than 20% of positive discussions, with their respective frequencies, are given in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2 How often givers' behaviours and skills were mentioned

Categories of behaviour	**Frequency of mention in positive discussions**
Personal qualities	56%
Challenge and advice	49%
Facilitative skills	46%
Information	46%
Giving feedback	33%
Managing the session	22%

The most commonly-mentioned unhelpful behaviours of givers were lack of interest in the individual, being too directive, not listening, and lack of empathy.

Our receivers had less to say about the skills and behaviours they themselves used (Table 3.3). The most frequently-mentioned behaviours were preparation before the session, probing, and gathering information. The givers we spoke to who commented on receivers' behaviours also emphasised these, and in addition pointed to the need for receivers to be proactive, taking some responsibility for how the discussion went, as well as being prepared to engage in self-disclosure.

Table 3.3 Behaviours and skills shown by receivers

General clusters	**Main categories**	**Most frequently mentioned items**
Characteristics of the person	Personal qualities	Open-minded, receptive, honest, reflective
	Intellectual qualities	Analytical, objective, rational
Management of the process	Preparation before session	Prepared, initiated discussion
	Managing the session	Managed the discussion
Interpersonal skills	Probing	Questioned, used open-ended questions, probed to provoke response, confronted giver
Content of the session	Gathering information	Used knowledge of organisation

In the following sections of this chapter, we examine how these behaviours were manifested in the examples of effective discussions.

3.2 Characteristics of the person

The importance of givers' personal qualities in receivers' accounts can perhaps be explained by the fact that, for many, having a helpful discussion depended on being able to find the right person to talk to. Receivers frequently commented on both the personal and intellectual characteristics of individuals who had helped them, though intellectual qualities were mentioned less frequently than personal ones.

Personal qualities such as honesty, frankness and being non-judgemental were seen as instrumental in establishing trust and an open dialogue. This is very much in line with person-centred approaches to career counselling, which emphasise the quality of the relationship developed between the counsellor and the client (Kidd, 1996).

Real interest in the individual and a commitment to helping them were mentioned as necessary features of many good discussions. It was important that the giver had the individual's best interests at heart and no particular agenda of their own. This was often where external givers had an advantage over internal ones. For example, one individual particularly valued a discussion about career aspirations with an independent consultant:

'This was done in a non-confrontational and non-threatening manner outside the influence of my then line managers, who had a different set of values and job priorities.' (R)

By far the most common complaint within accounts of unhelpful discussions was lack of interest on the part of the giver, leading to inability or unwillingness to engage with the individual in depth. In particular, appraisals were often seen as too cursory and managers were criticised for not wanting to get involved in career issues.

It was important for many that the giver did not just toe the organisational party line, but could be relied upon to give objective and impartial advice, recognising that it might be in an individual's best interests to leave the organisation. Several givers stated that they had to put the needs of the business on one side in order to help an individual make a wise decision. Many givers, some very senior, showed a striking degree of commitment to and engagement with the individuals they were helping.

Good givers motivated and enthused people. Some were even described as inspirational. They tended to take an 'affirming' stance, having high expectations of people and assuming that they were worthwhile propositions. They were often insightful and surprisingly perceptive about the individuals they were helping. *'He reads you like a book'*, said one individual of his line manager. *'Intuitive, I guess. He's sussing you out.' (R)*

Intellectual qualities. Givers who were analytic in their approach to the issues concerning the individual were often particularly valued. Qualities such as *'clarity of view'*, being *'realistic'* and *'using common sense'* were frequently mentioned. Good givers of advice were also described as having *'credibility'*, often based in their own experience and knowledge of the organisation. This in turn generated respect.

3.3 Behaviours arising from the giver's role

Within several positive discussions, the giver's status in the organisation or the knowledge they had accrued from experience in their role was seen as important to the success of the discussion.

Status. Conversations with senior people in the organisation were often valued because they had the power to open doors and promote the individual to others with influence. One individual, for example, saw her boss as a *'high-level guardian angel'. (R)*

Knowledge and experience. Advice from senior people was welcomed also because of their depth and breadth of experience in the business. Knowledge of the politics of the organisation and which strings to pull was important. One giver, for example, described how he made efforts to help people understand the implications of sending certain messages to the organisation, which could have the effect of putting them out of the running.

Many givers made explicit use of their often long-standing experience with the organisation. This involved recounting experiences from their own and others' careers, explaining the company's competency framework, and sharing knowledge about the organisation's HR strategy. One receiver described how her mentor *'gave a bigger picture view – he knew where investment was going into the business and the key initiatives, for example, leadership training, culture change, changes to category management' (R).* These had direct implications for the skills that managers needed to be developing.

In view of all this, it was not surprising that some examples of unhelpful discussions were with people who were unfamiliar with company strategy and development processes.

3.4 Management of the process

Preparation before the session by givers was mentioned by receivers in a minority of good discussions. Givers frequently talked about the planning they had done beforehand, and taking time to prepare for the discussion, indicated the seriousness with which they took on the role. In discussions which were part of a formal review process, preparation would typically involve talking to the managers for whom people had been working, as well as reviewing formal reports.

Some givers described how they felt it was important to 'prime' the individual before the conversation took place, so that they had time to think about the issues that would be raised. One individual's explanation of why a discussion was unhelpful shows how jumping in too quickly can immediately set the conversation off on the wrong footing:

'He called me in and said, "have you thought about moving roles?". This took me by surprise. My immediate reaction was "who's complained about me?"' (R)

Several receivers felt it was important that they themselves had also done some preparation in advance of the discussion. Many had sought out people who could help them, set an agenda and initiated the discussion.

Managing the session through creating an appropriate structure and a constructive atmosphere was a feature of a substantial number of good discussions. Many individuals spoke favourably of the way the giver structured the discussion, sometimes almost imperceptibly, to create a free-flowing conversation. For example, one praised an HR manager for the way he *'moved the conversation along by changing his line of questioning. With hindsight, he seemed to know where he wanted us to get to'. (R)*

It was important that discussions were tailored to individuals' needs, and several receivers appreciated the opportunity to agree a 'contract' at the start, with both parties setting out their own agendas and agreeing how to prioritise the issues. Similarly, as the conversation progressed, it was helpful if the giver checked that the person was happy with the way things were going, and took responsibility for time management. Indeed, two common complaints about unhelpful conversations was that the giver simply followed their own agenda and 'over-managed' the discussion.

3.5 Interpersonal skills

Interpersonal skills were frequently mentioned, and the skills that required more active interpretation on the part of givers (the group of behaviours we have called 'challenge and advice') were mentioned slightly more often than the more 'facilitative' types of skills.

Comparing these findings with analyses of career counselling skills and techniques, the more fundamental active listening and understanding skills seen as so crucial in career counselling (Ali and Graham, 1996) seem to take second place to the more interpretative skills. Perhaps this is not so surprising, however, as the kinds of experiences we were looking at differed significantly from a career counselling session. For example, givers were rarely 'neutral' participants in the process. They were often employed in the same organisation and sometimes they had on-going or supervisory relationships with receivers. However, facilitative skills were often key to the establishment of trust and an open dialogue, as the career counselling literature suggests.

Challenge and advice. Of the active interpretative skills, the most frequently mentioned behaviour was 'challenging'. This often took the form of challenging individuals' views of themselves, perceived constraints to their development or their reasons for making particular career choices. It also involved encouraging a positive attitude to work challenges and was often linked to honest feedback, particularly from senior people. Individuals frequently described being *'pushed out of the comfort zone'* and being helped to *'think outside of the box'*.

One manager described how, in a session arranged as a follow-up to a development centre, a psychologist *'took us apart'*, helping them consider the long-term benefits of change and development.

The use of probing questions helped individuals confront issues head-on, and some people were particularly grateful for direct advice from an assertive giver.

Many accounts sounded like demanding experiences for receivers at the time; but from the giver's perspective, this was often how they were intended to be. Explaining his approach, one commented on individuals' resilience in coping with and learning from these kinds of challenges and confrontations:

'People deep down know whether they are strong or not. If I push them in the right area we get there... I try to help people understand it's not a fair world... It's not enough just to do a good job. It can be a tough message.' (G)

Conversely, several conversations were seen as unhelpful because givers ducked performance issues, not wanting to damage the relationship with the individual or hurt their feelings.

Facilitative skills including listening, the use of effective questioning techniques and showing empathy were recognised as the skills used in helping relationships. Some respondents described these as *'people skills'* or *'facilitation skills'*, which left them with *'a warm feeling'* and gave them confidence that their concerns were being addressed. Negative conversations were sometimes characterised by a lack of listening and attention on the part of the giver.

These facilitative skills were often viewed as interdependent. It was seen as difficult, if not impossible, to really understand someone's concerns without being attentive to what they were saying and asking timely and relevant questions. Similarly, questions which moved the conversation on arose from an empathic understanding of the individual's position. It was also pointed out that it was just as important to listen to what was *not* being said as what *was*. Constructive conversations depended upon the listening skills of the receiver too.

Simple facilitative techniques were used to generate rapport: for example, acknowledging individuals' concerns early on, using open rather than closed questions, and generally taking care with the framing of questions. In other cases, empathy and rapport were there because the two parties knew each other fairly well already, or had experiences in common. Reflecting back was frequently used as a technique to demonstrate empathy and to explore ideas in more depth. One receiver, for example, was particularly impressed by the *'spot-on feedback'* on what she had said.

Lack of empathy featured in several negative conversations. One middle manager, for example, reported how a personnel manager showed total lack of understanding of him and his history: *'he treated me with the same brush as everyone else'. (R)*

Some senior managers who had been identified as good givers offered tips on establishing trust. These included making the discussion as non-hierarchical as possible, and using limited personal disclosure to make the dialogue more personal, especially sharing their own past career difficulties. Several givers took the view that a reputation for being trustworthy is spread by word of mouth.

Individual receivers also used some important interpersonal skills. Several described how they felt they needed to be open and assertive about discussing their needs and prepared to engage in a considerable degree of self-disclosure. Others explained how they took steps to seek feedback from the giver, probing to understand what the giver was trying to say, even if this was likely to be critical. Being open-minded about what the giver had to offer by way of information and advice was important too.

3.6 The content of the session

A key feature of many positive conversations was the content of the advice or information given.

Information. The information given in positive discussions was sometimes very specific (for example, how to arrange an international secondment), but more often covered a range of career opportunities. Good givers often broadened individuals' thinking about careers. Sometimes this involved issues of work-life balance, but it also entailed helping people understand wider aspects of the business. Talking to people with wide experience of opportunities both within and outside the organisation was particularly valued. External givers were frequently seen as helpful precisely because of their knowledge of broader career issues, often gained from their own experience.

A number of internal givers went so far as to encourage people to think about their options outside the organisation. They were seeking outcomes for the individual which were much wider than the next job move.

Relating individuals to opportunities. Not surprisingly, receivers were particularly interested in identifying career options that seemed to be most suitable for them at that stage in their career. Skilled givers took account of individuals' strengths and aspirations in offering information and advice. For example, one individual explained how her counselling manager *'discussed with me the pros and cons of each position. She was able to give me her opinion on how each opportunity would affect my promotion prospects and she knew my personality and how I would fit in with each department.' (R)*

HR often had a key role in this respect, and many of the HR managers we spoke to felt it was important that they should know the individual they were helping.

On the other hand, negative conversations were sometimes seen as unhelpful because givers did not know individuals or their background, and so the information offered was too general.

Giving feedback. An honest and analytical approach to giving feedback on strengths, weaknesses and potential, particularly from senior people, was welcomed. Givers were criticised when specific feedback was not forthcoming. After a bad experience of this kind, a young professional had to be talked out of leaving the company by someone else. He felt the manager had been *'just going through the motions'*:

'He gave me no guidance on the level I was supposed to be attaining. There were things I was doing that I wasn't aware of and they were damaging my career and weren't being pointed out. He didn't care.' (R)

The ability to give honest feedback was enhanced by the giver's interpersonal skills, and some skilled givers made sure that critical feedback was balanced by positive comments about performance. Others were less worried about providing balanced feedback, and it was interesting that some individuals still saw positive value in this, at least in retrospect. For example, one manager reported that the feedback he received during an appraisal with his line manager, which listed all the things he was not good at, was *'the worst experience of my life, but also the best' (R).*

Use of tools. Well-regarded givers sometimes used specific frameworks to help individuals think about careers. Sometimes this involved simply an organisational chart or aide-memoire covering certain topics, but some givers used more sophisticated models and tools, such as skill and competency frameworks or visual representations of careers in the context of broad life roles.

One giver, for example, described a simple framework where he asked about *'self, options and actions'*. Another used a model based on what people find challenging. He would ask them to describe what *'gives them a kick'* or to draw their perfect job, and then use his knowledge of the company and his contacts to suggest ways forward.

Use of 'life lines' was common. One giver used this technique to focus on long-term goals, asking *'by retirement, what do you want to have achieved?'*. Career issues were placed above a line drawn on a blank sheet of paper and broader 'life' issues below. The discussion focused on where they were on the line and where they wanted to be, both in work and in other life roles. A vertical set of parallel lines was used by another advice giver to help individuals explore wider or narrower career options and lateral moves.

Receivers also found metaphors of careers helpful. For example, one giver used the analogy of climbing a mountain to describe career development, asking questions about how far away the horizon was, the height of the mountain, and the tools needed in your back pack.

Future orientation. This was important for many receivers, although only a few discussions finished with an action plan, whether written down or otherwise.

Givers felt it was important to allow time at the end of the discussion to bring the dialogue to a clear end, and to discuss possible further contact. They tried to agree clear actions with individuals before the meeting ended and to give clear messages concerning whether, how and when another conversation would take place. Also, many givers made sure that they stayed in regular contact with the individuals they were helping. Giving people time, sometimes over several meetings, to work through career issues demonstrated that both individuals and their career decisions were considered important.

'Delivering' on promised actions was a clear signal of the giver's attitude to the relationship, and individuals who reported examples of unhelpful discussions sometimes complained that givers had betrayed their trust by not, for example, contacting someone as they had promised.

Some individuals found it difficult to follow up discussions with external givers, especially after events. This suggests that some form of follow-up should be designed into events.

3.7 Making links between skills, types of discussion and types of givers

To some extent, discussions in different settings were characterised by different skills and behaviours. The skills used by different types of providers of advice and support also tended to vary. Care is needed in drawing conclusions here, however, because of the small numbers of some types of givers and settings. Using the main categories of behaviours and skills identified in Table 3.1, Tables 3.4 and 3.5 show the behaviours receivers observed givers using in positive discussions within different settings and different roles respectively.

Table 3.4 Main behaviours, skills and characteristics of givers in different discussion settings

Each column shows a ranking of the most commonly reported categories of skills and behaviours, with the most frequently cited first. Only categories reported in at least 40% of discussions are included.

Informal meeting	Informal unplanned	Appraisal	Event	Mentoring/ Coaching	Follow-up	All positive discussions N=161
Facilitative skills	Personal qualities	Personal qualities	Information	Challenge and advice	Challenge and advice	Personal qualities
Personal qualities	Challenge and advice	Challenge and advice		Facilitative skills	Information	Challenge and advice
Information	Facilitative skills	Facilitative skills		Personal qualities	Personal qualities	Facilitative skills
Challenge and advice		Feedback		Information		Information

Note: *'One to one' regular meetings with boss and external meetings are excluded because the sample numbers were small*

Table 3.5 Main behaviours, skills and characteristics of givers in different roles

Each column shows a ranking of the most commonly reported categories of skills and behaviours, with the most frequently cited first. Only categories reported in at least 40% of discussions are included.

Boss	Other managers	Specialist adviser	HR	Mentor	Group at event	Friends/ work colleagues	All positive discussions N=162
Personal qualities	Personal qualities	Challenge and advice	Personal qualities	Challenge and advice	Information	Personal qualities	Personal qualities
Challenge and advice	Facilitative skills	Personal qualities	Facilitative skills	Facilitative skills		Information	Challenge and advice
Facilitative skills	Challenge and advice	Information	Challenge and advice	Personal qualities		Challenge and advice	Facilitative skills
	Feedback	Feedback	Information	Information			Information
		Facilitative skills					

Findings from these tables which are worthy of note are:

- Good mentoring often requires the mentor to challenge the individual and offer direct advice.
- The personal qualities of the giver were particularly important in appraisals. We had relatively few appraisals among our examples of good discussions, but it would seem that appraisals work best when the appraiser shows interest and commitment, and is seen as honest and impartial.
- Information giving, though less frequent generally, featured strongly at events such as development centres and career workshops.

3.8 The dynamics of an effective career discussion

Our findings concerning what goes on in effective career discussions show how crucial it is that both the giver and receiver take the discussion seriously and take steps to prepare for it. Both must be actively involved throughout, and each should take some responsibility for managing the conversation.

Figure 3.1 sets out a model of effective career discussion, based on our findings on the skills and behaviours displayed by givers and receivers in good conversations. The model comprises four stages: setting up the discussion; establishing trust; sharing information; and agreeing action. The stages are broadly sequential, but any one stage may need to be revisited at some point in the discussion. Listed in the centre of the model are the key features and tasks of each stage. Questions that givers and receivers may need to ask themselves are given towards the left and right of the figure respectively.

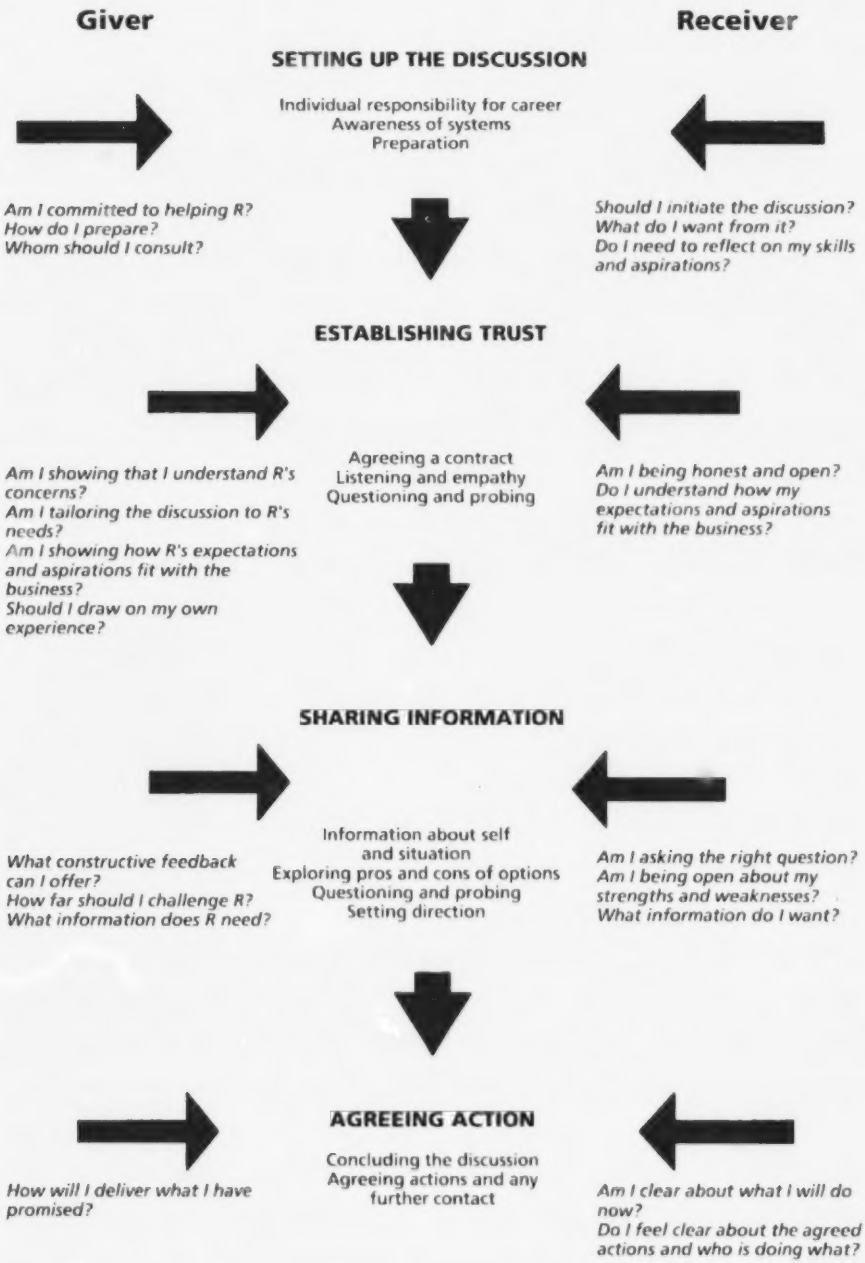
The horizontal arrows are positioned to represent the developing relationship between giver and receiver. Good discussions involve each party taking steps to engage more closely with the other.

3.9 Summary

In general, the most important behaviours and qualities shown by givers in good discussions are: the giver's personal qualities; challenging the receiver and offering advice where appropriate; using interpersonal skills to facilitate the discussion; and providing information about opportunities.

- The key personal qualities of effective givers are: interest in the individual and commitment to helping; honesty; impartiality; and being seen as trustworthy. These qualities seem to be just as important as having specialised helping skills, if not more so.
- Many of the interpersonal skills that help a conversation flow are really quite basic (for example, using open rather than closed questions, being attentive, trying to see things from the individual's point-of-view).
- It is helpful if both parties take time to prepare for pre-arranged career discussions. In particular, both need to be clear about what they want to get out of the conversation and to discuss what they think the conversation should cover.
- To get the most out of a discussion, receivers need interpersonal skills too. They need to be open and willing to engage in self-disclosure, and assertive about their needs.
- Managing the way the discussion progresses is best viewed as a joint process. Successful conversations about careers develop a flow and two-way feel as they progress.
- Givers should not be too afraid of being frank and honest, particularly in giving constructive feedback about skills and potential. This is what many receivers need and value. Direct advice is often appropriate too. Non-directive counselling-type behaviours can often contribute but are rarely sufficient.
- Unsuccessful discussions often come about because the giver lacks interest and commitment to the individual; does not address or attempt to understand their concerns; 'over-manages' the conversation; or avoids frank and honest dialogue.

Figure 3.1 The dynamics of an effective career discussion


Giver
Receiver
SETTING UP THE DISCUSSION
Individual responsibility for career
Awareness of systems
Preparation
Am I committed to helping R?
How do I prepare?
Whom should I consult?
Should I initiate the discussion?
What do I want from it?
Do I need to reflect on my skills and aspirations?
ESTABLISHING TRUST
Agreeing a contract
Listening and empathy
Questioning and probing
Am I showing that I understand R's concerns?
Am I tailoring the discussion to R's needs?
Am I showing how R's expectations and aspirations fit with the business?
Should I draw on my own experience?
Am I being honest and open?
Do I understand how my expectations and aspirations fit with the business?
SHARING INFORMATION
Information about self and situation
Exploring pros and cons of options
Questioning and probing
Setting direction
What constructive feedback can I offer?
How far should I challenge R?
What information does R need?
Am I asking the right question?
Am I being open about my strengths and weaknesses?
What information do I want?
AGREEING ACTION
Concluding the discussion
Agreeing actions and any further contact
How will I deliver what I have promised?
Am I clear about what I will do now?
Do I feel clear about the agreed actions and who is doing what?

4 What happens as a result of effective discussions?

How does an effective career discussion affect an individual and what action takes place as a result? In this chapter we review the outcomes from the discussions. We distinguish action from the overall impact of the discussion. Impacts include actions; but not all impacts are actions. Many impacts are changes to thoughts or feelings about a situation.

In our interviews we asked participants about the impacts of their discussions and also whether any action resulted. We also asked who took action as a result of the discussion. It is important to understand that the data on impact and actions reported in this chapter are based on what receivers told us happened as a result of the discussions they had. When receivers described the impact of a discussion, they often included some aspects of the conversation itself (as in Chapter 3), for example the information they had gained. They also included thoughts and feelings which arose after the conversation, for example how it had changed the way they thought about their career.

We start by reviewing whether action resulted from the discussion and then move on to consider the broader impact of discussions.

4.1 Actions

Roughly three-quarters of the receivers reported that one outcome from their positive discussions was action of some sort. Note we did not consider thinking to be action, so although many discussions resulted in thinking or feeling differently about a situation, this was not regarded as an action.

Where action was taken after positive discussions, receivers reported that just under three-quarters of these actions were taken by the receiver, 20% by both the receiver and the giver, and the remainder by the giver alone.

Interestingly, when we spoke to givers, they reported that they were involved in taking action in about two-thirds of cases. Although this discrepancy appears quite large, it may well be that in some cases both givers and receivers were unaware of actions undertaken by the other party. It may also be that our sample of givers over-represents givers with formal roles in organisations, and that this group was more likely to be involved in actions than a more representative sample of givers might have been.

One characteristic of negative discussions seems to be that they do not result in actions. Although our sample of negative discussions was quite small, in three-quarters of cases receivers reported that no action resulted from these discussions.

Some types of conversation seemed more likely to lead to action than others. In particular, positive discussions with one's manager seemed to be more likely to lead to action, mainly no doubt because managers were more likely to be in a position to broker activities as a result of the conversation than were many other people.

As half the negative discussions reported by receivers were with their managers, it is noteworthy that in two-thirds of these cases, no action resulted from the discussion. It may well be that many discussions are seen as negative partly because no action resulted from them.

Informal unplanned discussions were slightly less likely to lead to actions: only about two-thirds of informal unplanned discussions led to actions, compared to three-quarters of other discussions. This may relate to who takes action as a result of discussions in different settings. In particular, managers, other than an individual's line manager, involved in on-going relationships and/or formal mentoring were much more likely to take action than other managers involved in one-off discussions. We found that in formal mentoring and other on-going relationships, other managers were involved in taking action in 20% of cases, compared to only 7% after one-off discussions.

We also have no reports of anyone other than the receiver taking action as a result of events or positive discussions with friends or work colleagues. This may be partly attributed to the relatively small number of positive discussions taking place in these settings but is, perhaps, an indicator of where responsibility for action resides in these settings.

4.2 Impacts of discussions

Nearly all positive discussions have positive impacts on receivers. In fact only one positive discussion was reported by an individual to have had no positive impacts. In contrast, three-quarters of negative discussions had no positive impacts. Table 4.1 highlights some of the impacts reported in our interviews.

Table 4.1 Impact of discussions

'I felt good about myself and more in control'... 'My confidence and motivation significantly improved – I can still think of that conversation now (4 years later) and it still has that effect.' (Discussion with an external career counsellor)

'I felt better because I could see progress being made. I felt the company was interested in me as a person, and looking to develop people.' (Discussion with line manager)

'I felt in control of the job and felt I had a career path. It fixed me... I felt happier about working life in general. There are positive benefits about how you treat your own staff.' (Discussion with line manager)

'It challenged my thinking a bit; I realised I was being a little narrow and not enough out of the box.' (Discussion with senior manager)

'You're in this big firm with all the facilities, but I felt lost in a big organisation.' (Negative discussion)

'I came out feeling more positive. I knew I definitely wanted to do this and I knew what my reasons were. I was more focused.' (Discussion with senior manager)

'Made me realise I need to find what was right for me... It gave me a kick up the arse to do something about it.' (Discussion with senior manager)

'He mapped out career options and choices... He really knew the world and how it worked – he painted in the canvas. My project manager was also in this discussion. Afterwards he said of the discussion "that doesn't happen to many people. It has never happened to me".' (Discussion with senior manager)

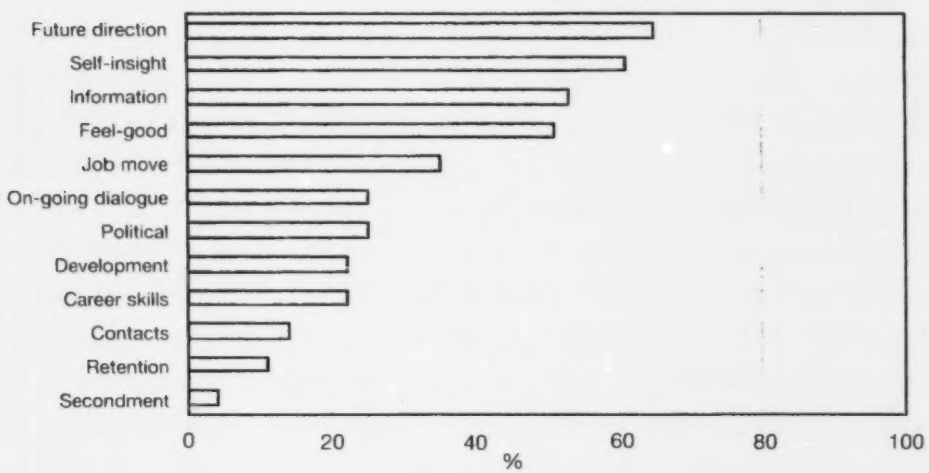
Discussions have a range of impacts on the individuals involved. We have grouped impacts under 12 broad headings. These are summarised in Table 4.2. Note that these headings are not necessarily exclusive, so that one impact could be coded under more than one of these headings: for example, receiving information about the succession-planning process would be coded under both 'information' and 'political' impact categories.

Table 4.2 Main types of impact

Impact category	Examples
Future direction	Identifying or exploring particular career options relevant to self
	Career decision or clearer view of direction, development or career plan
Self-insight	Self-insight including feedback on ambitions, lifestyle, values, skills, performance, strengths and weaknesses
	Feedback on potential
Information	Information on company and range of career opportunities
	Information on company processes and politics
	More general career information including information on external career opportunities
Feel-good	General feel-good (*ie* reassured, feel better about self)
	Feel better, reassured or motivated about work, job or career
Job move	Job move resulting from or influenced by discussion (*ie* not agreed before discussion)
	Job prospect or application for a job which did not result in a job move
Development	Skill development in current job (*eg* informal coaching, developmental activities, such as a project)
	Formal training
	Getting a formal mentor or coach
On-going dialogue	Led to on-going dialogue with career on agenda
	Another meeting with boss
	Another meeting with HR or link with internal company systems (*eg* succession planning, development cells)
Political	Information on company processes and politics
	Increased visibility in organisation
Career skills	Change in approach to career management, career skills, role model
Contacts	Contacts to follow-up excluding boss
Retention	More positive attitude to organisation
	Influence on attitude towards staying with current employer
	More likely to leave current employer (negative)
Secondment	Secondment influenced by discussion (*ie* not agreed before discussion)

Figure 4.1 shows how frequently positive impacts were reported by receivers as a result of positive discussions. It is immediately clear that some types of impact are much more common than others: for example, impact on future direction, impact on self-insight, impact on information and impact on feel-good were recorded in over half the positive discussions.

Figure 4.1 Positive impact on receivers from positive discussions



About a third of positive discussions led to job moves; and about a quarter led to on-going dialogue of one kind or another with the organisation, greater political awareness about internal processes, improved career skills or development opportunities for the individual.

Less common impacts reported from positive discussions were contacts to follow up, retention (*ie* impact on decision to stay or leave an organisation), or secondments.

Apart from a small number (3%) of positive discussions that receivers reported made them more likely to consider leaving their present employer, and one discussion that had both positive and negative impact on an individual's future direction, there were only two other positive discussions that had a negative impact on the individuals involved (and both these discussions also had positive impacts).

4.2.1 *Number of impacts*

Many positive discussions had positive impact under a number of these headings, with a quarter of discussions having impacts under more than five of the headings and only about one in six discussions having impacts in two or less.

Nearly all (95%) positive discussions had no negative impacts and none had more than one negative impact. On the other hand, 60% of negative discussions had negative impacts and only a quarter had positive ones.

Appraisals were the setting that had the widest range of positive impacts on average, with impacts in 5.9 of the 12 categories, while regular one-to-one meetings had the narrowest (average 2.7) range of positive impacts.

As far as whether meetings with certain people had a wider range of impacts than others, we find that meetings with HR generalists had the widest range of impacts (average 5.6), and those with HR development the narrowest (average 3.4), along with friends outside the organisation (average 3.6).

These results raise a number of questions:

1. Do some impacts go together?
2. Are some impacts more associated with actions than others?
3. What is the impact of negative discussions?
4. Are some impacts associated with particular discussion settings?

4.2.2 *Impacts that go together*

Apart from some impacts of discussions being more frequently reported than others, there is also evidence that some impacts go together more frequently than others. In particular, we find that:

- Impact on future direction is strongly linked to impact on information more generally, and to a lesser extent with having on-going dialogue and political impact.
- Impact on feeling good is linked to impact on self-insight, information, job moves and retention.
- Impact on on-going dialogue is linked to impact on contacts as well as future direction.

4.2.3 *Linking action to impact*

Some impacts are more likely than others to be associated with taking action after a discussion. This is not altogether surprising as some impacts strongly imply action taking place (*eg* contacts, a job move). In some cases, indeed, it is hard to think of action not resulting if a discussion had the particular impact claimed.

Types of impact most strongly associated with action are:

- *On-going dialogue:* associated with action 19 times out 20.
- *Contacts:* associated with action 19 times out of 20.
- *Job move:* associated with action 93% of the time.
- *Career skills:* associated with action 9 times out of 10.
- *Development:* associated with action 9 times out of 10.

4.2.4 *Negative discussions*

The main negative impact reported from negative discussions was not feeling so good about oneself: for example, not being reassured or not feeling better about work or one's job. It seems that a key feature of negative discussions is their failure to provide reassurance – the 'feel-good' factor that is such a significant feature of positive discussions.

4.3 Linking impact to discussion setting

One key question is whether different settings for discussions result in different impacts. In this section we examine the extent to which discussion setting and who it was with are associated with different kinds of impact.

Tables 4.3 and 4.4 show the frequency of different impacts in positive discussions by discussion setting and who it was with, respectively. The figures shown in the tables are the percentage of discussions in this setting in which a particular impact occurred. For example, the first entry

indicates that impact on future direction occurred in 68% of discussions that took place at informal meetings. In the tables, entries have been highlighted to indicate above-average occurrence of a particular type of impact. Note that we have omitted regular one-to-one meetings and external meetings from Table 4.3 as they occurred relatively infrequently in our sample. We have also omitted the impact on secondment from both tables as it occurred so infrequently.

Table 4.3 Main positive impacts of positive discussions in different settings

	Future direction	Self-insight	Information	Feel-good	Job move	On-going dialogue	Political	Development	Career skills	Contacts	Retention
Informal meeting *(N=47)*	**68**	60	49	43	**38**	21	**34**	15	21	**28**	9
Informal unplanned *(N=32)*	**69**	44	**69**	**59**	**44**	**31**	**31**	19	13	13	6
Appraisal *(N=12)*	58	**75**	42	**83**	**42**	**50**	17	**50**	**25**	0	**17**
Event *(N=13)*	62	**85**	**62**	**54**	**46**	15	8	15	**38**	0	**23**
Mentoring /coaching *(N=22)*	**68**	**68**	**59**	50	23	9	**27**	14	**27**	14	**14**
Follow-up *(N=23)*	**70**	**70**	39	39	35	**43**	17	**30**	22	9	9
All discussions *(N=161)*	65%	61%	53%	51%	35%	25%	25%	22%	22%	14%	11%

***Note**: Items highlighted show in which settings a particular impact was recorded with above-average frequency*

Table 4.4 Main positive impacts of positive discussions with different types of people

	Future direction	Self-insight	Information	Feel-good	Job move	On-going dialogue	Political	Development	Career skills	Contacts	Retention
Boss *(N=34)*	59	53	44	**59**	32	**35**	24	**41**	**32**	12	15
Other managers *(N=43)*	65	**70**	**56**	42	**49**	**28**	**33**	19	9	**19**	5
Specialist adviser *(N=22)*	**73**	**82**	36	**64**	**36**	18	0	18	**32**	5	**18**
HR *(N=17)*	65	53	53	35	**41**	**47**	**35**	18	**29**	**35**	0
Mentor *(N=22)*	50	55	**59**	45	23	9	**36**	**23**	14	14	**23**
Group at event *(N=10)*	60	**80**	**60**	**60**	**40**	10	10	10	**30**	0	**20**
Friends/work colleagues *(N=13)*	**100**	31	**85**	**62**	8	8	**31**	0	15	0	0
All discussions (N=161)	65%	51%	53%	51%	35%	25%	25%	22%	22%	14%	11%

***Note**: Items highlighted show in which settings a particular impact was recorded with above-average frequency*

Table 4.3 shows that each setting produces a different range of impacts, although some impacts are found in many of the different settings. Impact on future direction occurs in all settings. Appraisal and follow-up meetings do not deliver information about career opportunities to such a great extent as other settings. On the other hand, when effective career discussions take place in appraisal, they have above-average impact in seven of the 11 areas.

It is possible to read these tables in two ways. First of all, they clearly show the most frequent impacts in different discussion settings. Secondly, they can also be used to identify whether particular impacts occur more frequently in some settings or in discussions with certain sorts of people than others. This can be done by comparing the base rate for different sorts of impact, *ie* how frequently they occur overall, with their frequency in these particular settings.

Some impacts occur relatively infrequently: for example, career skills or contacts. The highlighted entries in the tables show, for example, that the most frequently mentioned setting with impact on career skills is an event, and that the people who most frequently have discussions with an impact on career skills are bosses and specialist advisers.

Perhaps surprisingly, retention is most impacted by mentors and groups at events. Appraisal is the setting that most frequently results in development and on-going dialogue but also in making people feel good. A good appraisal may be a rare thing but it can be very motivating.

Some types of impact might be seen as particularly important, so we might need to know the sorts of discussion most frequently associated with particular types of impact. Some questions to which this analysis can offer partial answers are:

1. What sort of discussions influence retention?
   Answer: External discussions; discussions with formal mentors; events.

2. What sort of discussions influence development?
   Answer: Appraisal; follow-up meetings; regular one-to-one meetings; discussions with one's boss.

3. What sort of discussions help individuals acquire career skills?
   Answer: Events; discussions with one's boss or with specialist advisers.

4. What sort of discussions facilitate job moves?
   Answer: Events; informal unplanned meetings; discussions with other managers.

5. What sort of discussions give people a sense of direction?
   Answer: The majority of discussions in most settings and with most sorts of people.

While these answers are not necessarily definitive and may be influenced by our samples, they do highlight the fact that discussions in certain settings and with certain types of people are more likely to have particular types of impact. If some impacts are of particular importance, then facilitating or providing the appropriate opportunities may encourage discussions that address these concerns.

4.4 Summary

- Most positive discussions reported by receivers led to actions being taken, while most negative discussions did not lead to any actions. This is almost certainly a key difference between positive and negative discussions.

- In nearly all cases where action was taken, it was taken by the receiver. Although givers were also involved in taking action in about a quarter of cases, they took action on their own infrequently.

- Four main types of impact occurred in over half the positive discussions: future direction, self-insight, information and feel-good. About a third of positive discussions led to job moves; about a quarter led to on-going dialogue with the organisation, greater political awareness about internal processes, development opportunities or improved career skills on the part of the individual.

- Nearly all positive discussions had no negative impact; but over half the negative discussions had negative impacts and only a quarter had positive ones. The main impact from negative discussions was emotional: feeling bad about oneself or about work or one's job.

- Discussions with different people and in different settings have different impacts. Facilitating or encouraging opportunities for certain types of discussion to occur may increase the likelihood of valued impacts taking place.

5 Participants' reflections on career discussion

We have looked at the features of particular discussions which were perceived as effective, or less effective. This chapter summarises what the participants had to say about how they thought career discussion *should* be conducted. 114 of the 'receivers' made general comments about how they would like their needs for career discussion to be met: who they would like to talk to and in what setting. 33 of the 'givers' interviewed made comments about how they felt the issue of career discussion should be handled by their organisations. The views of givers and receivers in these respects were often very similar, so they are discussed together below.

With relatively open-ended questions in this part of the interview, a very wide range of comments were made. 596 separate comments made by 147 people were classified and coded. Although this is a large volume of data, the number of people making any particular comment was still relatively small (30 or so at most), so numbers are used sparingly below.

5.1 Where should career discussions take place?

5.1.1 *Appraisal*

There were 42 comments specifically about career discussion in appraisal. The largest group of these were strongly critical of the quality of appraisal or its suitability as a setting for career discussion. Such criticisms included: lack of time in appraisal to explore career issues; appraisal as a formal process which managers just wanted to get through (*ie* a lack of real quality in the process); and short-term task focus for appraisal squeezing out development and career issues:

'The company makes a mistake in not giving appraisals enough gravitas. No-one takes it seriously. It's changed every year: different forms, ways of reckoning. It's so complex. It's just going through the motions.' (R)

'You can discuss development in appraisal, but I have never had an open-ended discussion about career in appraisal – it's really about performance.' (G)

Some people felt that a development review separate from performance appraisal stood a better chance. Another interesting suggestion, especially from good givers of advice, favoured more frequent and less formal 'one-to-one' meetings with the boss. Such a pattern both allows a closer relationship to grow and makes it possible to discuss career issues when relevant but not at every meeting and in a more relaxed atmosphere:

'Formal appraisal varies in quality. As you go up the organisation there is less time for appraisal. Personally I put more weight on quarterly reviews – a structured discussion of performance and direction. Doing this more regularly feeds into a more positive climate for development. Writing up discussions adds little value.' (G)

'I have formal one-to-one meetings with all my team to provide a chance to check how things are going. Like a husband and wife, if you don't talk for a few months you don't share anything any more. You need to make sure the communication is always there.' (G)

5.1.2 *Other career processes*

Some participants referred to specific processes which their own organisation used to support career development. Those who mentioned the counselling manager process at PwC were evenly split between those who found it helpful and those who felt that it was variable or that counsellors needed more careful selection. Lack of continuity of counselling managers was an issue for some:

'My current counselling manager is very good. It's just pot luck and it depends on the individual. They should pick people who are interested in doing the job. It has too big an effect on people's careers. The framework isn't important, but the person is. The opportunity to pop in to see them is important too.' (R)

There was positive feedback from those who had experienced the development centres and career workshops run by Consignia. They were, however, aware that these are expensive interventions. More follow-up was seen as important in getting the most value from a development-centre approach.

A number of people in various organisations felt they needed better feedback from the corporate succession-planning or development-cell process on how their potential and career future was seen by the business:

'There is a career and succession-planning system in the division but it is still closed and I don't like that – it is subjective and quite dangerous. People should know about their potential rating.' (R)

Mentors were often mentioned (see below), although formal mentoring schemes were advocated less often than informal mentoring.

5.2 How often and how formal?

5.2.1 *Frequency*

The search for people who had positive experiences to recount led us to believe that good career discussions do not happen all that often. Only 10-15% of the target groups sent positive responses, which was not high considering that the participating organisations chose groups of high value and were often implementing several career interventions. This view was reinforced by the interviews. Positive experiences stood out in people's memories partly because they were fairly unusual. Most of those interviewed would like more opportunities to talk about their careers, although some felt they were good at getting this when they needed it.

'Regular' discussions were desired, often meaning at least on an annual basis. A similar number of comments requested discussions which were flexible in their timing or on-going. Some givers of career support reminded us that it often takes more than one discussion to resolve an issue. So an individual may need quite an intensive series of discussions when going through a particular decision or transition, but much less at other times.

5.2.2 *Formal or informal*

Of the 60 comments about the formality or informality of career discussion, over three-quarters expressed a preference for informal discussions (48%) or a mix of formal and informal (28%). 12% preferred a formal process for career discussion. Respondents saw the issue of 'formality' in two rather different ways.

For some, 'formal' meant taking place in a recognised corporate process – usually appraisal. It carries the connotation of being 'on the record' in some way and probably results in some written record. Formality in this sense was mostly seen as undesirable, and as inhibiting the self-disclosure required for an effective discussion. Some people wanted an 'informal' discussion with the ability to send a resulting more formal message to the organisation. This might then link with development provision or with the succession or development review process.

The second meaning of 'formal' concerned the feel of the conversation rather than its organisational context. Here there was a strong desire for a fairly 'informal' feel to give the degree of openness required and to escape a sense of hierarchical distance between the giver and receiver. 'Formal' conversations were associated with a lack of honesty and in-depth discussion, and conjured up the frequent experience of ticking boxes on forms. A career discussion can be constrained by either a hierarchical dynamic and/or a rigid structure. An informal conversation gives the receiver more control, is more flexible in its content and is therefore able to cover deeper and more personal issues.

5.3 Who do individuals want to talk to?

5.3.1 *The self-managed career*

30 comments about the role of the individual in career development strongly supported the primary ownership of career resting with the individual. Some commented that their career discussions had been initiated only by themselves. Some were happy with this, but others felt that they were *'left to their own devices too much'*. For some people, the idea of self-managed careers was linked to their desire for career discussions to facilitate their own thinking, not *'telling them what to do'*.

5.3.2 *The boss*

Of the 51 comments on the role of the boss in career discussion, the largest group were negative about their experience of talking to bosses about career, or acknowledged it was difficult to talk to the boss about career. This latter group included givers who recognised in their own experience that they found it more difficult to help their direct subordinates with their careers because other priorities got in the way. These barriers included: inability to make time; fear of damaging a good working relationship; fear of demotivating the receiver when giving negative feedback on their career; and fear of losing the person from one's team. On the positive side, the boss should know the person well, but this does not seem to outweigh the difficulties:

'When you are the boss it can be harder. You have better evidence of their ability but you also have a more day-to-day relationship which creates problems in talking about the future. The relationship is more task-oriented and it can be hard to find the time to talk about personal development. If someone wants to change job, they are not quite so open with their boss'. (G)

'Like it or not, managers can support you or throw spanners in the works. The best thing is to get them on your side or at least to have them not obstructing you. Sometimes this is the best you can hope for.' (G)

'Line managers are critical in careers because they are a source of support. The majority of line managers are not very skilled or interested in career issues and this is not getting better. Line managers also do not have frameworks for dealing with career issues. This makes them feel out of control and lacking in confidence in this area.' (G)

A significant group wanted discussions both with their boss and with others, or to have another person in the frame if they could not talk to their boss.

In some cultures it is important to 'keep the boss in the loop' even if not having the deepest discussion with them. Bosses can block as well as encourage, so they need at minimum to accept the individual's intentions and support their development in the current job. This often means the individual going back to their boss after a discussion with another person.

Smart career managers select jobs partly on the basis of finding a boss who will support their development:

'The key thing is to have a line manager who can interpret the business line on these issues into something real and openly supportive. Bosses who just follow the rule book don't help. I changed job to move away from a boss who wasn't offering support to one who does.' (R)

5.3.3 *Mentors*

The word 'mentor' was used by over 20 people for the kind of person with whom they wanted to discuss their careers. The picture is of someone off-line, focused on the person, often senior, with a real knowledge of the business and the skills to engage in quite a deep level of discussion over a period of time. Only a few people had in mind a formal mentoring scheme. The study also suggests that the introduction of formal mentoring for some groups (*eg* graduate trainees at Kingfisher) may lead to the growth of informal mentoring for a more diverse population. Whether formal or informal, people need some support for effective mentoring:

'Mentoring is always treated too formally but it's hard to find a mentor for yourself. In mentoring relationships, the chemistry has to be right. We use volunteers. There is not enough training for mentors and not enough feedback loops to find out if it's working.' (G)

5.3.4 HR

There were 38 comments about the role of HR in career discussion. The main message was that people would like to be able to go to HR for career support either when their boss was unhelpful, or if they wanted to take soundings from a number of people, or when they wanted a more in-depth and confidential discussion. However, there was also a fair amount of negative feedback on HR in terms of its credibility and competence. Sometimes HR was seen as overly concerned with rules and procedures, losing sight of the real relevance of career issues to people or the business:

'HR people see careers as filling jobs – getting them in a slot but not necessarily in the right slot. They lack the skills to develop the kind of relationships which would lead to career discussion.' (R)

A number of good givers in senior management were particularly keen on the HR function offering expert or in-depth support both to individuals and to themselves:

'I work closely with central personnel team, although I feel primary responsibility is in the line. Personnel can sometimes help by being more independent – helping people see what they really want. Sometimes it is hard for people to explore their real needs or preferences with their boss. I bring senior HR people in to talk one-to-one to my own team members.' (G)

As with receivers, some givers felt that the HR function was not always able to deliver on this partnership.

Some HR people had reflected a lot on where their function could play a useful part:

'I feel I add value in the connections I can make – helping individuals and vacancies to come together – I can be the oil between those two wheels. People have careers but we develop people. You have to bring something to the individual. Most people do not come to be counselled. They want help in seeing opportunities and seeing connections. My advice to managers in the business is only as good as how well I know the people. My advice to individuals is only as good as my knowledge of the roles. HR people who sit in their offices can't do this job.' (G)

5.3.5 Other people in the picture

As we might expect, comments were made about a wide range of other people who might offer career discussion. Some people wish to talk to others with specific expertise in career guidance – most often someone external:

'The one-to-ones with the external career consultant worked best for me, followed by periods of reflection and self study. Ideally, an annual review suits me. This allows a re-assessment and re-definition of life priorities. But it has to be done as time out – away from work, and independent of line manager's interference to allow a balanced overview to be achieved.' (R)

The attraction here is independence, confidentiality and real expertise: a capacity for in-depth support. For some an internal but specialist resource was attractive, for example career or management development specialists within HR. The senior person responsible for succession was sometimes of particular value to senior managers or high-potential individuals.

There is also a desire to have access to senior managers more generally, most often because they have the best understanding of the range of career options and can give sound advice:

'I get approached because I am senior in a hierarchical business but also approachable and informal and well networked. Sometimes a boss who knows me sends them.' (G)

'I think informal discussions with senior managers are the most helpful. It is best if these are managers I have worked with in the past as they can be realistic about my capabilities and I can be honest about what I really want to do and why.' (R)

Peer support is also mentioned, and one person who had started a self-help group along learning set lines found this a very effective model.

5.3.6 *Horses for courses*

The idea of a range of people to talk to is in itself attractive – a 'horses for courses' approach, where the individual can meet their different needs by going to different kinds of people:

'Discussions to do with getting jobs – task-type discussions – are best with the line. You also need contemplative discussions – about feedback and what's right for you. HR are better placed to do this.' (R)

'Ideally I would like a formal process twice a year with my boss and/or development adviser; plus other sources of feedback (eg from team); plus impartial advice (eg from HR) to give the broader view. I also use friends outside work to give ideas.' (R)

5.4 The person and the relationship matter more than the hat

Some of things people mentioned in their desired model of career discussion are more about the kind of person than the organisational role they have, and more about the kind of conversation than the process setting within which it occurs. This relates strongly to the importance of personal qualities highlighted in Chapter 3.

5.4.1 *Confidentiality and trust*

Confidentiality was mentioned by a large group of people. What individuals mean by a desire for a confidential discussion is that the content of the discussion does not get written on a 'company form' or talked about to others. This is partly about the desire for informality and partly about being able to control what information is passed outside the conversation. The latter is in turn closely linked with the level of trust the receiver has in the giver of advice and that person's integrity.

5.4.2 *Relationships*

Another common comment was that the career discussion should be with someone they had a good relationship with or who knew them well. Knowing someone beforehand can offer both a climate of trust and knowledge of the individual and their skills and preferences. People often see the relationship as coming first, and career support coming along later:

'Mutual respect is fundamental to more informal mentoring relationships – the relationship needs to come first and career support follows.' (R)

'I don't want people exploring my innermost thoughts. I want a relationship to evolve – here I am to help you. Even with someone you like, the right relationship takes a while to evolve.' (R)

Even when discussions are with people who are not well known, individuals often want to know the person is trustworthy and to get an early sense of what they often called *'personal chemistry'*.

5.4.3 *Independent, impartial and open*

The words independent and impartial were used to mean someone who was 'off line' and could be more focused on the person than immediate organisational needs; someone with 'no axe to grind':

'I prefer self-initiated, informal discussions, with somebody that you know but who is sufficiently removed to be impartial.' (R)

The concept of being open also fitted in here: open with the person, and open in feeding back what the organisation thinks of them or has in mind for them.

5.4.4 *Relevant knowledge and information*

A number of comments reflected a strong need for information about career options and opportunities. It is therefore not surprising that people want to talk to others who have relevant knowledge or information. For some people (especially in early career) this means knowledge of their own area of work and possibly also of related areas. For others (often later in career), information on wider options or a broader overview of the business is more important. Sometimes external people can be helpful in this respect. They may not have much information on the employing organisation, but may have a wider experience of business.

'I often see young graduates a couple of years in. They often haven't talked to anyone except their peers. If they are interested in changing jobs, I advise them to go and talk to people and let it be known that they are looking for a move. More senior people need more understanding of where opportunities might be. They have higher levels of personal insight but need to know more strategic things about where the business is going. They need to position their careers and have more to lose by misjudging what is going on.' (G)

5.5 A management culture which pays real attention to individuals...

A diverse set of comments placed career discussion in its wider organisational context, especially in relation to management culture. There was concern in some cases that organisations are not really attending to people management very well. Organisations unwilling to help individuals with their career issues appear not to value them as people.

A few respondents were very positive about staff development becoming embedded in the culture, but others felt it was getting worse. High rates of organisational change can make staff feel rather pessimistic about how much their organisation listens to their career concerns. For these varied reasons, some respondents felt that managers do not currently see career discussion as important:

'There is a lack of acceptance that managers like myself, when frustrated with being told to just get on with it by senior managers, can simply look for alternative jobs. This is not to sound negative, but simply shows that there is a danger the business will continue to lose good managers if it does not go half-way to meeting their career needs and personal values.' (R)

It is interesting in this context to look at why good givers of career support felt this was a worthwhile use of their time. Several linked their own interest in career discussion with a need to motivate, develop and retain staff rather than just to manage their performance:

'There is a corporate immune system which rejects real engagement with development, at very highest levels. I feel a bit evangelical because I am irritated by wasted potential. Sometimes you listen to retirement speeches and it seems like a wasted life. I once had a wet-blanket boss and vowed I was never going to let this happen to the people who work for me.' (G)

'I have gone from being 120% task-driven to being people-driven. Why? What we do is complex, and we don't want barriers between people. I can't achieve it all through hierarchy. I need people who are comfortable, who have ability and who manage themselves.' (G).

'Career is so important to individual life and so peripheral to the organisation which thinks about people as resources, not in terms of their life story. If you see motivating people as lying at the heart of management, then career support is part of the package of motivating people and therefore a managerial duty.' (G)

Several givers also emphasised the need for career discussions to confront situations in which individuals have over-inflated career aspirations or have been promoted too quickly or have been pushed in the wrong career direction.

5.6 ...and gives everyone the skills to both receive and give support

A group of comments highlighted the need for managers to have the skills to conduct good career discussions, their current lack of such skills or their need for training in this area. Some people applied this comment to all employees, not just to those managing others:

'I have never been encouraged as a boss in the careers area – never offered training in this. It is seen as something to be endured and got through. It takes effort to be good at this. You have to feel strongly and passionately about it, and it takes time. I read, talk to people and experiment.' (R)

5.7 Summary

So what have we learnt from our receivers and givers of career support about their preferred models for career discussion? Individuals have diverse needs and preferences, but on balance it seems that:

- Individuals would like to have meaningful career discussions with their bosses and sometimes do. However, even good bosses are constrained in career discussion by the other pressures on the boss-subordinate relationship. They are not always in the best position to give good career support.
- Annual appraisals do not easily accommodate in-depth career discussion. Even separate development reviews are too mechanistic. More informal and frequent one-to-one meetings with the boss make it easier to establish the kind of relationship in which career issues can be raised.
- Individuals see positive career discussions as quite rare occurrences. They would simply like more.
- People want to have career discussions when they need them – not on some organisational cycle. Some like a 'little and often' form of discussion; others like more in-depth support much less often.
- There is a clear preference for informal career discussions over formal processes for doing this, although some people would like both formal and informal opportunities to discuss their careers.
- Many want the opportunity for 'off-line' career discussions with someone there just for them. This requires high trust, a degree of impartiality and the ability to control what information gets shared with others. A number of people can satisfy this need, including mentors (preferably informal), career specialists (internal or external) and suitable senior people in the line or in HR. The relationship and the kind of person may be more important than their formal role.
- Organisational interventions (*eg* mentoring schemes, development centres) or special roles (*eg* career counselling managers) can help if the providers of such support are skilled and genuinely concerned with helping individuals to progress their career issues.
- Both individuals and good givers of career support would like an HR function which would act as a skilled partner in the careers arena, offering confidential advice to individuals and support to the line.

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6 Implications for employers

This section pulls together some messages for those who set career development policy in organisations and design HR processes. They stem both from the data on current experiences of career discussions and from what participants felt would work better. They also build on comments made by the consortium members about what they felt their organisations had learned from the project. The consortium members chose to share their learning and interestingly each picked out rather different findings as most important from all the data they had seen. Some of the learning points they recorded are shown in Table 6.1.

Table 6.1 Key learning points identified by the consortium members

- Individuals want open discussion of their career issues, but corporate culture does not always encourage people to spend time thinking or talking about this.
- Individuals are often willing to take most of the responsibility for action.
- Individuals want to be constructively challenged about their career plans.
- Individuals often benefit most from on-going career discussions.
- Formal HR processes play a smaller part in career support than informal interactions, although formal interventions can also stimulate useful informal discussions afterwards or outside the formal process.
- Good givers of career support need to have a real interest, offer challenge, be trustworthy and find the time. This is about their mindset as well as their skills and knowledge.
- People's needs for information are very varied. Effective career conversations are with givers who have relevant information as well as skill.
- Career support often grows in relationships which have already built a foundation of trust and mutual respect.
- HR does not always have a clear role in career support although both individuals and the line would like it to. HR is not always seen as credible in this area.
- We need to focus as much on the skills and attitudes of receivers of career support as on the givers.

Some of the conclusions presented in this chapter challenge current fashion. But, since they are based on what people have experienced as effective, they may provide some concrete clues to improving career development practice.

6.1 Career discussions are central to self-managed careers

Career development is about a person's future. Organisations appear to position career development as an optional (and less important) add-on to performance management. For employees, however, it is centrally concerned with their future working life. That is how important it is and how personal it is. That it is why primary responsibility for it rests with the individual, but also why they want their organisation to understand its importance to them.

A laissez faire attitude to career development wastes talent. Career development is also about how effectively someone's skills are deployed and developed within their employing organisation. That is why employers should be active rather than passive partners in career development for all employees. We interviewed many employees whose business contribution was only realised when someone else took a positive interest in them.

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People have varied needs for information and advice from others. Many employees are expected to manage their own job moves by applying for internal vacancies. But to take good decisions about their careers, most people need to obtain information. This includes: feedback on their performance and perceived potential; information on career options inside (and sometimes outside) their current employer; information about how to go about getting a job move or development activity; information on job vacancies; an understanding of company politics; and so on. Some of this information is simple and factual and can be posted on intranets. Most of it, however, is subtle, personal, tacit, and needs to be related to the specific individual and their situation. Conversations with other people are central to the transmission of such information and to acting on it.

Employees need improved access to effective career discussions. At present, relatively few employees have easy access to the kinds of discussions about their careers which would help them significantly. Also, we found that many of our respondents commented on how rare these were for them. We need to change the messages about where and with whom you should discuss your career, and we need to improve the skills and level of understanding with which such discussions take place.

6.2 Boss-subordinate appraisal does not meet the need for career support

The received wisdom is that the most important discussions which individuals should have about their careers at work are with their bosses and in a formal appraisal or development review. This model has never been effective. Others have documented the creaking of performance appraisal under too many objectives (Strebler and Bevan, 2001).

This study provides yet more evidence that neither employees nor good managers find appraisal the best place to talk about careers. Only a very small proportion of effective career discussions are in formal appraisals. Not only is appraisal overloaded, but its focus on short-term performance sets the wrong mindset for considering career. The emphasis within appraisal on 'recording' information in fixed formats is also at odds with what happens in effective career discussions.

Appraisal can be a good place to raise career issues but not often to explore or resolve them. Although the study found a small number of appraisals which had contained very helpful career discussions, they were the exception rather than the rule. A separate discussion on another occasion will usually be needed. Separate development reviews and personal development plans (PDPs) may allow more time but still risk becoming form-filling exercises rather than ways of enabling genuine exploration of career development issues. More frequent one-to-one meetings between boss and subordinate may be a better forum in which to raise and discuss career issues as they arise.

If the organisation plans for people's careers, this should be transparent to the individual. The whole pressure to use appraisal to 'record' career plans is a hangover from a time when organisations managed career moves for most employees. For most staff, the organisation does not now need to ask for formal career plans as part of appraisal or a development review because it will do little if anything with this information. Often, however, there will be serious succession or development planning processes for selected groups of employees. In such cases it is important to be clear what the organisation needs to know about the career plans of such selected individuals and how this information will be used. There need to be clear discussions feeding information into the corporate review and back to the individual. The purpose of this dialogue is to reach a shared view of next steps and development priorities as these will be acted on by the organisation as well as the individual.

Career support is the job of the line, but not just the boss. Even outside formal appraisal, the boss is often not the best provider of career support. Good bosses can provide excellent career support but they only do so in a minority of cases, usually where a close and trusting personal relationship has developed. The flaw in relying on the boss – even a good boss – is that the boss-subordinate relationship has many in-built barriers to open career discussion. Again this study adds to evidence that we set unrealistic expectations for the role of the boss in providing career support to subordinates (Mayo, 1997; Yarnall, 1998). Re-positioning the boss as one of several possible points of call is more sensible.

6.3 Encouraging informal discussions with networks of managers

Informal discussions with someone you trust. What individuals really value is access to the kind of person who can best meet their individual needs for career information and advice as these needs arise. Individuals vary considerably in how often they would like to discuss their career. When seeking simple job information, a brief and quite impersonal discussion is fine. Indeed, our study found quite a lot of such discussions. However, discussions aimed at significant career decisions are more personal and exploratory. They are closer to career guidance than just giving information or advice. They often occur in the context of an informal mentoring relationship.

Such discussions rely on finding someone you feel you can trust and whose judgement, knowledge and perspective you respect. It is therefore unrealistic for the organisation to try and control who employees should and should not talk to. Rather, the organisation needs to make it easier for employees to approach people they sense might be able to help them. Only a few examples in this study were of advice from friends and peers, but some of these were very effective indeed. Perhaps we should encourage more people to use peers for career support. We need to place a much greater emphasis on encouraging informal career discussions and informal mentoring.

Managers as a career support network. Many effective career discussions are with managers in the organisation who are not the direct boss. These can be organisational grandfathers and grandmothers, ex-bosses, and managers met through work but not in a direct reporting line. These discussions can be 'one-off' meetings to find some specific information, but can also be part of on-going informal mentoring relationships. Very senior managers and directors can have a special part to play in providing a broader business overview and suggesting alternative career options. The immediate boss could be encouraged more often to give the individual access to their own networks and help them to see other people who may have the information they need. We need to re-position the responsibility for offering career support to the line as a community, not just with the boss as the single designated contact. Interestingly, this would match modern succession-planning practice which treats people development as a collective management activity.

6.4 Specialist help and formal interventions can provide more options

Where the line is still weak on people management, the organisation is very turbulent, or individuals have deep-seated problems, more targeted career interventions can provide effective career support. Formal mentoring, development centres, career workshops and external coaches all come into this category. Facilitators and formal mentors need to be selected with great care, but the most skilful of them can have a life-changing impact. Employees also need to be aware of the full range of career functions which mentors can cover, and employers need to consider mentoring in relation to other processes for career development (Jackson, 1993). Interventions which concentrate on assessment (*eg* development centres) need significant one-to-one follow-up to address the career issues they raise. The normal model of de-briefing with the boss will seldom be adequate. Specialist support and formal interventions can be particularly useful in helping individuals to develop insights into their own skills and preferences.

This study provides some interesting but limited evidence that the use of formal or specialist career support may encourage more widespread informal activity. For example, formal mentoring schemes may introduce the idea of mentoring and a model of how it works, which can empower others to set up their own informal mentoring relationships.

Different patterns of provision provide overlapping benefits. Discussions with different people in different settings have a large overlap in terms of the ground they cover and the outcomes they achieve. So what one person gets from a good boss, another might get from an informal mentor, an HR professional or an external coach. As indicated above, however, some mechanisms lend themselves well to certain outcomes. For example, specialists are particularly strong on helping individuals to reflect on themselves but may be weaker on the company information side (especially if they are external to the business). Senior managers, mentors and peers all supply useful information on career options, and senior HR people can be good at doing this too.

Building in some deliberate overlap can help. The study also shows that individuals have very diverse experiences of the quality of the people they speak to (especially with their bosses) and some diversity in their preferences (*eg* in relation to frequency and formality of dialogue). For both these reasons it seems sensible to give individuals a range of options for how they obtain effective career discussions and to point out such alternatives. At least some of these options should be 'off-line' (*eg* formal or informal mentors, confidential advice from HR or specialists, career workshops).

6.5 HR is needed as a real partner in career support

It is fashionable to see the role of HR as predominantly that of systems designer in relation to career processes. Too often this results in attempts to structure or support career discussion which are found to be very rigid and constraining. The individuals in this study were hostile to the imposition of forms, checklists, elaborate competency frameworks, ratings and scorings. They simply got in the way of serious conversations about their own future.

This study points to three valuable roles for HR in improving the quality of career discussions, which reflect a multiple perspective on the place of HR in a modern business (Ulrich, 1996).

First, there is a *hands-on role* in giving direct career support. Individuals would often like to go to HR as an alternative source of more impartial information. For more senior people, HR directors may also have the best overview of opportunities and politics. Givers would also like to be able to involve HR, especially where someone is interested in opportunities in another part of the business, or when an individual needs more in-depth support (closer to career counselling).

Secondly, HR can bring in more *specialist expertise* (*eg* internal or external psychologists, personnel people trained in career guidance) or procure formal career interventions. A range of approaches, such as mentoring, development centres or career workshops, all have the ability to generate improved career support if enough time is allowed for reflection and discussion with a skilled mentor or facilitator.

The third role for HR concerns *building the capability* of the individuals within the organisation to conduct effective career discussions, as we see below.

6.6 Mainstreaming the skills and knowledge for career discussion

This study has shown that both givers and receivers of career support need skills and understanding to make their discussions effective. We have seen that general inter-personal skills are important but not sufficient. The ability to establish trust and to challenge and confront in a non-threatening way are significant and subtle skill sets. They are less passive than those of traditional 'counselling' and the support given is not always impartial. Indeed, knowing when to offer positive advice is part of the challenge. An understanding of career issues and a repertoire of questions and frameworks which can be used to help career decision-making are also essential components.

We train managers and employees in objective setting and performance review. We do not train them in how manage their own and other people's development, and – as part of that – how to conduct a useful career discussion. It is high time we did.

The HR function normally helps to set the agenda for core management training and staff induction. This is where HR can help to improve the capability for career discussion. This is less about designing forms and much more about practical training as part of the core training of all employees.

This study does not advocate a new formal initiative called 'career discussion'. Rather we need to recognise that people do need to talk about their careers as a normal part of organisational life. Part of the strength of the idea of effective career discussion is that it makes the link between the abstract and mysterious notion of career development and something as tangible and everyday as a conversation.

6.7 Career discussion, personal attention and motivation

We are left with the difficult issue of why organisations should be concerned if their employees cannot access useful discussions about their futures. There is little evidence from this study of a simple short-term bottom-line answer. Employees frustrated about their careers may not become immediately less productive. Nor will they necessarily leave, although in volatile labour markets they might well do so. The study does, however, show a strong feel-good factor in effective career discussions. This agrees with the opinions of the most experienced givers of career support in this study. They saw career discussion as part of developing the potential of employees (maximising their business contribution over time) but even more as an essential component of a motivational style of leadership (maximising their engagement).

So the business benefit comes via the motivational impact of attending to the real concerns that employees have about their futures. This implies that giving effective career support is a matter of mindset just as much as of skill. Some managers with all the skills and knowledge to provide effective career discussions choose not to do so. They see it as time-consuming and not of immediate benefit to themselves. Yet we found enough excellent role models in this study to show that some managers – often at very senior levels – regard supporting others in managing their own careers as one of their most important tasks. They have no doubt that it benefits the business and that the future lies with those who engage deeply in their own and other people's career development.

7 Lessons for individuals and those they talk to

Some employees experience very useful discussions of their careers at work. These instances are characterised by things those individuals ('receivers') are doing to get and use help, and things those they talk to ('givers') are doing to make their advice genuinely useful. These notes summarise some of these lessons. Many people in organisations will be both givers and receivers of career support.

7.1 Effective career discussions

Before we look at specific tips it is worth saying something about why career discussions are important and what kinds of things go on in them.

Why think about career discussions? Most organisations now expect employees to take charge of their own careers and most employees agree with this general model. However, most people need some information and advice from others to be able to manage their own careers effectively. When we talk here of an 'effective career discussion' we mean one which is of positive value to the individual in managing their own career.

Individuals vary in how often they need to discuss their careers with others. Some events trigger the need for discussion: applying for jobs and not being selected; feeling bored or 'stuck'; organisational re-structuring. When making a major job move or change of career direction, an individual may need a number of discussions, possibly with more than one person. At other times, individuals will need much less intensive support.

Career discussions can convey different kinds of information to the individual. This includes: feedback on performance, strengths and weaknesses; feedback on how their potential is seen by the organisation; information about particular jobs or areas of work; a broad overview of career options inside (and/or outside) the organisation and how these might look in future; information on how to go about making a job move and how to manage the organisational politics.

Career discussions can raise deep personal issues. Some career discussions go beyond offering information, or negotiating about a job move or development opportunity. They explore the motivation of the individual, their work-life balance and their career aspirations. Such discussions can lead to a wider view of career options in terms of what would best suit that individual and their circumstances. These more exploratory discussions require high levels of openness and trust.

Career discussions need to be managed. As with any exchange, both parties need to make sure the conversation covers the right issues and that they attend to the needs and feelings of the other person as well as themselves.

After a career discussion a range of actions may be taken, including: development activities within the current job or through courses, projects, secondments *etc.*; meetings with other people to explore further or gather information; applying for specific job moves.

7.2 Kinds of career discussion

Three things to think about in particular are: (1) where career discussions take place, (2) who is involved and (3) what kinds of things both parties might be trying to get out of a discussion. It is important that all employees are aware of the full range of options for seeking career support and the kinds of things a career discussion can cover. These are summarised in the two panels in Figure 7.1.

Figure 7.1 Settings for and impacts of career discussions

Who with and where?
With boss:
In formal appraisal or development review
In regular one-to-one meetings
Informally
With other managers (eg boss's boss, ex-boss, project managers, managers in other departments, directors):
As a one-off
On-going as informal mentor
As formal mentor
At events
(eg development centres, career workshops, training courses, learning sets)
With career specialists in one-to-one discussions
(eg psychologists, career professionals, recruitment specialists in the organisation or outside)
With staff of the HR function in the organisation
With other colleagues at work, or friends and family outside work
Scope and impact of discussion
Informational
What kinds of jobs are around? Where is the organisation going?
Self-insight
What does the business think of me? How do I stack up? What do I want? Where does work fit with my life?
Direction-setting
Pros and cons of specific career choices or directions
Action-oriented
How do I make a job move or access development?
Educational
How do I think about career issues? What ideas or frameworks might help me?
Political
Getting access to networks and raising my profile
Motivational
Confidence building, being offered positive support

There is a great deal of overlap in the possible scope and impact of discussions in different settings and with different people, so there is no simple read-across from settings on the left-hand side of Figure 7.1 to impacts on the right-hand side. In many ways the person a receiver is talking to is more important than the hat they are wearing or the kind of meeting they are in. Receivers should try to be open-minded about what a particular person can help them with. However, here are a few suggestions as to where receivers might find a particular kind of help:

- Bosses should be a good source of feedback on skills in the context of current job performance, and can also give access to development on the job or nearby (in projects, secondments or courses).
- Other managers can also give feedback and they, as well as colleagues, are a good source of information on jobs elsewhere in the business. Directors and senior mentors can often give the best overview of career opportunities in relation to the future of the organisation, as can senior HR people.
- These senior groups of people can also help to raise an individual's profile, widen networks, and advise on the tactics and politics of managing career moves.
- Career specialists (internal or external) are skilled at helping individuals reflect on themselves and their aspirations, and relate these to their career direction. Events such as career workshops or development centres, which offer opportunities to share experiences with colleagues, are also good for developing self-insight.
- Specialist advisers can often help individuals feel good about themselves and feel positive about their career. Peers (one-to-one) or at group events do this too. A good boss can be a very motivating person – so individuals should choose a boss as much as a job.
- If one person is not helpful, individuals should not be put off, but should try talking to someone else.

7.3 How to make career discussions more effective

Practical tips for givers and receivers of career support

Tips for givers of career support	*Tips for receivers of career support*
SETTING UP THE DISCUSSION – *things to do beforehand: the individual in the driving seat; seeking the right person to talk to; setting the agenda; preparing for the discussion.*	
See the individual as in the driving seat of their own career. See yourself as someone who might be able to help them manage this better. This applies to all employees, not just those you manage.	Put yourself in the driving seat. When you want to discuss your career, don't wait for someone to approach you. Make sure you get the help you need by asking for it.
As a line manager, try to talk to the people you manage about their future as well as about their current job performance. If you are helping people who do not report to you, consider whether you need to involve their boss at some stage.	Try and develop a relationship with your boss such that they will actively support your career. If this is impossible, it is still usually best to keep your boss informed.
Explain to your staff where career development fits within your organisation's approach to appraisal. Let them know if you plan to raise career issues in their appraisal meeting. Suggest a follow-up meeting if career issues come up in appraisal but need more time for discussion. Tell your staff that they do not have to wait for a formal appraisal to talk about career issues. Frequent one-to-one progress meetings with your own team make it easy to put careers on the agenda every few months.	Organisations often have a formal appraisal system, or sometimes a separate development review. If you want to raise a career issue in appraisal, tell your boss this beforehand. As discussion time in appraisal is short, ask for a follow-up meeting if there are career issues you could not discuss fully. Take advantage of other career support you may be offered such as mentoring or development centres. Ensure you follow up the career issues they raise.
Don't be afraid to offer career support to employees who do not report to you, especially if you can see they are stuck or frustrated or have untapped potential.	Most career discussions do not take place in the context of a formal process such as appraisal. Think about the best people to help you address your career issues, especially those with whom you could have a really open discussion. If you need information, approach those people who are likely to have access to the information you need. Senior managers, friends and HR professionals can all be helpful, depending on your needs.
Don't spring job moves on staff without warning. Raise the issue and then try and find space for a proper discussion.	If you think you will be looking to make a job move, start raising this issue a few months ahead of time. This gives the organisation time to respond to your needs.
Sometimes career discussions occur naturally when you are working with someone. These can be very relaxed and helpful. Don't, however, give really important career feedback (eg the chance of a new job or a conflicting view of their potential) without taking the time to explain properly. If someone books a meeting to talk to you about their career, ask them what they want to talk about.	If you want to talk to someone, ask for an appointment and explain what you want to discuss. Ask for at least half an hour.
If you know the person you will be advising, reflect on them beforehand. If there are issues you want to raise with them, tell them in advance. If you don't know them, see if they are happy to send you a CV.	Prepare by thinking about your own situation and skills and where these may be of value to the business. Frame the questions you want to discuss and map out the career options you might be considering. Are there concrete things you want out of the discussion?

ESTABLISHING TRUST – *setting the right tone at the start of and throughout the discussion: open and realistic frame of mind; showing real interest in the person.*

If you don't already know the person, you need to establish an open feel to the conversation. Make them comfortable by behaving in a friendly and less formal way. Show your interest in them; listen carefully; and check you understand what they are saying. Make clear you understand that they may wish the discussion to be confidential. Use some information about yourself, including how you have felt about your own career, to show you are willing to be open too.	Go into the discussion in an open frame of mind. Listen carefully to the information and advice offered and try not to be too defensive. If you trust the person, the more you can disclose your own concerns and feelings, the more you are likely to get out of the discussion.
Don't let short-term business priorities constrain or bias your advice. Show you are interested in the person first and foremost and then be realistic with them about whether their aspirations can be accommodated within the business. Don't be parochial: think about the business overall, not just your bit.	Show that you realise the importance of your career plans being realistic within the business context. Show your concern with the organisation and with other people as well as yourself. Show that you are thinking about the timing of any job move so it takes into account the business need as well as your own needs. Link your skill development with what you will then be able to do for the organisation.

SHARING INFORMATION – *the heart of an effective discussion: simple framework for the discussion; constructive challenge; broad view of career options and aspirations; pros and cons.*

Some people you advise may steer the discussion themselves. If they are hesitant, it can help to have a simple framework in mind. For example: where are you now? where do you want to get to? how are you going to get there? Sharing the way you think about career issues can be very helpful.	Listen out for the frameworks the giver uses to think about careers. These can be useful for you in future as well as in this particular conversation.
Use your own and other people's careers to give real-life illustrations of career paths and how people make moves and develop themselves. Don't expect the other person to want a career just like yours.	The giver may talk to you about their own career experiences. These may provide valuable insights, but you don't have to behave just like them.
People value frankness in career discussion and there is benefit in challenging their ideas as a means of helping them think more clearly about the future. Challenge needs to be constructive, not aggressive.	Be prepared to have your ideas challenged. Ask 'why' the other person disagrees with you. Don't reject what they are saying outright.
Do your best to meet their needs for information. If they ask about jobs in a part of the business you don't know, suggest someone else they can talk to and help them make this contact. Share what you know about relevant opportunities outside the business. This powerfully conveys your interest in finding what's best for the person. Curiously, it often helps to retain them!	Ask about relevant career options. Try to broaden your understanding of what kinds of work are open to you and how the changing business is affecting these.
Sometimes people need to think more deeply about their career aspirations and how these fit in with other aspects of their lives (eg family responsibilities, mobility). It is often difficult to talk openly about these tensions at work. If you sense someone needs to explore these areas, do raise them, but respect their right not to share personal matters with you.	You need to think about what you really want, as well as what career options you have. Sometimes we do not stop to think about what we really want, especially when we are expected to want promotion. It can help to challenge your own aspirations in a discussion with someone you trust. If the discussion gets too personal for your comfort, then say so.
Career discussions often need to explore a range of options and look at the pros and cons of each. Doing this systematically can be helpful, but remember: the decision is theirs not yours.	Use the expertise of the other person to explore specific career options which might suit you best or be most possible to achieve. Remember: the decision is yours as to whether you agree with their advice or not.

AGREEING ACTION – *ending well: leaving time for action planning; clarifying confidentiality; clear actions and responsibilities.*

Leave enough time at the end of the discussion to bring it to a close and agree what happens next. Make sure the person knows they can come back to you if they need to.	Make sure you come away with a clear view of what you need to do next. Remember: good career discussions often take place over several sessions, with action and thinking between. Ask if it is OK to come back if you need to.
Taking formal notes of a career discussion often threatens the trust you have built. People fear they will be 'held to' some agreed plan. They also fear it will get into the wrong hands. Written notes may not be needed unless a third party needs some relevant information. Make sure you have agreed with the individual what parts of the discussion are confidential, what will be shared with named individuals, and what might go into some formal process.	Be clear about what information should remain confidential to the two of you. If some information needs to be shared with others, clarify who will do this, how and when.
Most career actions these days rest with the individual, but it can sometimes be necessary for you to effect an introduction or agree a development activity. If you do agree to do something, it is critical you do it – and quickly.	Try to leave the meeting with some concrete things to do. Don't expect the giver to do it all for you, but ask for their help if there are some things you can only do with their support (*eg* making contact with someone they know but you don't). Think who else you need to inform about what comes out of the discussion.

What shouldn't you do?

As a giver of advice you should not:

- Appear uninterested in the person asking for advice or fail to show empathy with their situation.
- Misunderstand the issue by failing to listen or to check with the individual.
- Jump in with a career suggestion or even a job offer without preparing the ground first.
- 'Toe the party line' rather than being frank and open.
- Promise to do something during a discussion and then fail to follow it up.

As a receiver of advice you should not:

- Wait for help to come to you rather than going out to find it.
- Fail to prepare the advice giver for the discussion.
- Reject advice or feedback out of hand, fail to listen attentively, or get aggressive or defensive.
- Appear interested only in yourself and not in the organisation or other people.
- Fail to tell the giver of support your real career issues.

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Appendix: Method and sample

Contacting givers and receivers of career support

The method of contacting participants varied slightly between organisations. In most cases the first step was to select one or more 'target groups'. These included groups selected by level (*eg* senior managers), career stage/age (*eg* graduate trainees), or experience of career intervention (*eg* a group who had attended a development centre). The second step was to contact (usually by e-mail) all the people in this target group and ask for volunteers who had experienced positive discussions. This self-selected population was then randomly sampled to give the numbers of interviewees sought in each case. The third step was to follow up some good 'givers' of support nominated by the interviewed 'receivers'. In some cases those who responded to the e-mail trawl but were not selected for interview were invited to give their views by e-mail.

Where volunteers came forward from a large e-mail trawl, about 10-15% of the populations volunteered themselves as having had a positive career discussion. This was the case even in groups, such as graduate trainees, who receive additional career support.

Numbers participating

The results are based on responses to semi-structured interviews with employees from five organisations and a short questionnaire e-mailed to other employees in two of these organisations. The interviews were carried out with 118 individuals, 85 of whom described career discussions that they had experienced which they considered to be effective. The remaining 33 interviews were conducted with individuals who had been identified as effective givers of careers advice. Most of the interviews were carried out by telephone but a proportion was conducted face-to-face. 32 individuals responded to the questionnaire. 19 of these described effective career discussions that they had experienced, while the remaining 13 reported their general views about how they would like to receive career support.

Characteristics of participants

60% of receivers were male and 40% female. 39% were aged under 30, 40% were 30 to 39 and 21% were 40 and over. Givers were more likely to be male and older: 80% were male; 31% were aged over 50, 35% 40 to 49 and 35% 30 to 39; none was 30 and under.

The career discussions reported

The interviews and questionnaires generated information on 251 discussions based on data from 134 individuals. 209 of these discussions were described as positive and 42 as negative. Receivers of careers advice reported 162 positive and 36 negative discussions. Givers of career advice reported 47 positive and 6 negative discussions. Nearly all (88%) of the positive discussions reported by receivers took place while they were working for their present employer. 61% of discussions took place within the last two years and a further 10% were part of a series of discussions that were still going on.

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